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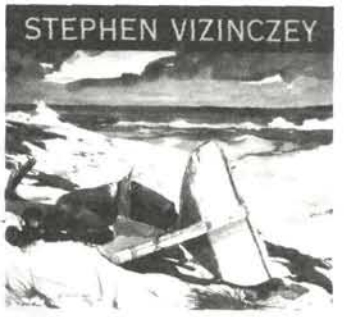

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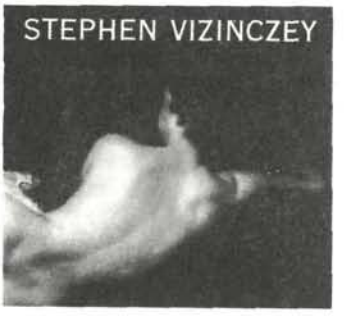

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

A revised edition of a book of poems by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

HAYDEN CARRUTH: *The Sleeping Beauty.* Copper Canyon Press. $10.00p.

Publication of this issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency, and by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to express our appreciation to these organizations for their generosity.

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Individual subscription $20.00 per year in U. S.; foreign including Canada $24.00. Single copy $6.00. Special rate for bulk orders. U. S. A. Newsstand Distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, Ohio 44870. Library subscriptions in England: Periodicals Division, B. H. Blackwell Ltd., P. O. Box 40, Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford. Back issues and reprints of Volumes I—XLI available from AMS Press, Inc., 56 East 13th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003. Microfilms of Volumes I—XLI available from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. We handle directly all requests for permission to photocopy.

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WILLIAM TREVOR

Bennett Award Acceptance Speech, 1990

I am honoured, and delighted.

Writing fiction is, most of all, a solitary pursuit. A lone figure in a room seeks the attention of a crowd that is often too busy to notice. But now and again a hand waves back and there is the warmth of communication. For me, this is such an occasion. I value it most gratefully.

The razzmatazz that now fashionably accompanies the giving of literary awards has caused, during the last few years, some mild concern in literary circles—though I understand there is less cause for this in the United States than in a handful of European countries. An explosion of hype, the promotion of rivalry until the excitement of the race-track or the prize-ring is achieved, wagers laid down as fiction-writers are urged toward the winning line: all this is part of a new cultural scene. Increasingly there is an awareness that beneath such alien glitter the hard-working, matter-of-fact written word is beginning to feel more than a little uneasy.

But *The Hudson Review* has been that same word's friend for a very long time, and continues not to let it down: one of the pleasant aspects of the Bennett Award is the manner in which it is organised and presented. The priorities observed are the priorities of art itself, and in saying thank you to *The Hudson Review* I am saying it for that also. Thank you for being what you are. Thank you for tonight's generosity. Thank you for waving back.

The above comments were made by William Trevor upon being presented with the 1990 Bennett Award at a dinner in New York on November 14, 1990.

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Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

If there is a sign that something revolutionary may be happening in the realm of poetry it is, on the one hand, the sloganeering of the New Formalists disdained by John Haines (in his review, Summer 1990, of *Expansive Poetry*), and, on the other, the mandarin attitude he must take to disdain it. Mr. Haines has not considered enough that the excesses of the revolutionaries are the equal and opposite reaction to the force, external in terms of difficulty of publication, internal in terms of the resulting self-doubt, imposed upon them by the mandarin class. That class is the modernists and their successors, in which I would include the postmodernists as being not so much anti-modernist as only more modernly modernist—which seems to be what "post" might hope to signify.

Mr. Haines invokes Edwin Muir's *The Estate of Poetry* as an example, counter to that of the New Formalists, of a statesmanlike treatment of poetry, and deplores the New Formalists' seeking of a popular audience, thinking in some sense, presumably, of the amorphous "public" of Muir's book. But again Mr. Haines has not reflected sufficiently, and perhaps Muir has not either, in his statesmanlike approach, that there is in Muir's book an implicit criticism of modernism itself for its turning poetry into the expertise of a clique—turning it away from humanity as such towards "modern" man, viewed as a changed nature requiring a changed poetry. Should that sacred, unexamined premise of modernism be allowed to remain sacred and unexamined? Does human nature change so easily, given a change in its external conditions? Modernity is superficial upon human nature; is poetry also superficial, so that it must change with every new modernity?

The clique founded upon that unexamined premise of modernism found its natural home in the universities. How? The preoccupation of modernism is with the modern—that is, with the ever more narrowly different; its typical problem is: What is there left to be done? All of this suits the academic temperament well, with its desire for the "scientific" and the "original." Poetry, though still called "art," ceases to be of value as such and is respected only as it provides grist for the scholar's mill. And the past ceases to be the living tradition which it was for poetry and becomes, necessarily, from the point of view of the modernist, an antiquarian study.

Joseph Epstein asked: "Who killed poetry?" What if the real, however disquieting, answer to that question is: Pound and Eliot and the modernists did, by demanding that poetry deal with the narrowly

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modern rather than with human nature as such, its traditional concern? But poetry will rise again if human nature has not in fact changed. The New Formalists are right to seek a more popular audience. It is true that no movement can bring about good poetry—but a movement such as this may now be necessary to counter the mere formulaic dismissal of any poetry, good or bad, simply because it does not exhibit "a modern sensibility."

Brunswick, Maine DENIS CORISH

John Haines replies:

Denis Corish has written an interesting response to my review of *Expansive Poetry*; with some of it at least I can agree, and I thank him for it. I wish, however, that he had troubled to define his understanding of "mandarin," for as applied to someone of my background and disposition it seems hopelessly off the mark.

I think most of his points are answered in my review. It ought to be clear that what I object to in part is not a return to metrical verse and/or narrative forms as such, but to the so far unproven claims for achievement. One would like to think that a decent modesty might prevail, and that a poet, or group of poets, would be willing to wait until something more like a substantial and mature body of work was available before the critical ranking was in place and the promotional machinery began working.

I am unable to see the situation, as Mr. Corish seems to, in terms of an endowed clique. What does dismay me is a mentality, all too prevalent now, that insists on the choosing of sides. According to this, if I respect Eliot I am somehow disqualified from also respecting Williams. Or if I cherish the poems of Wallace Stevens I must consign Robinson Jeffers to the dustbin. And so forth. But why must I choose among the poets whose work I love? Why can't I have them all, each for the sake of his or her own excellence? Well, in fact I do have them all, and so does any reader who cares about the art and not some petty jurisdiction adjacent to it.

Perhaps confusion arises in the use of the term "tradition." For the sake not of argument but of clarification, let me say that I regard the pre-eminent moderns, whether by this is meant Eliot and Yeats, Pound and Williams, or whomever, as being well within the tradition—the only tradition that matters, that of the individual writer attempting to clarify and give form to some fundamental content in the age in which he must live. And I suppose further that what we call modernism had its beginning at least as long ago as Wordsworth. What is "modern" in the end but a restatement of essential content in

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a form that renews not only the art but the material of life and the language it must make use of? Thus, for me the tradition includes, besides the more obvious names already cited, Edward Thomas as well as Edwin Muir; it includes Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, Hugh MacDiarmid, Kenneth Rexroth, and Phelps Putnam, as well as any number of poets who for one reason or another have fallen into an undeserved obscurity.

One would like to know more exactly what is meant by a "popular audience." I would not, for example, expect the poems of Louis Simpson to become popular. Not only are they far too intelligent to attract a wide public, they contain, and at times exemplify, that criticism I refer to in my review. I believe this criticism to be absolutely essential, unless one assumes that the function of poetry is to confirm a consensus view of reality, or that it is meant to entertain a middle-class audience and flatter its attitudes and opinions.

If one looks at what is generally called modern poetry, in English as well as elsewhere, one sees a wide variety of forms, poems of many different kinds, and the fact is that modernism had room for these. The question is what happened to that generous and adventurous spirit that it has declined into faction and clique, into program and petty careerism?

The institutionalization of intellectual life far exceeds that small corner occupied by poetry, as I'm sure Mr. Corish must realize. But if certain effects of modernism have become the property of university departments, I am not going to make the mistake of blaming the individual poets who were, after all and as usual, making the best of a difficult time. One notices in this connection, despite invidious references to the "tenured corps," that nearly all of our formalists teach. One suspects from this that the "revolution" anticipated by Mr. Corish may end in becoming merely another orthodoxy, surely a dismal prospect.

Well, I am for an open and creative disagreement. It might interest Mr. Corish to know that one prominent spokesman for the new formalism read my review and remarked that he agreed with *most* of it. That is rather more of an agreement than I expected, and more than enough.

According to Mr. Corish, "poetry will rise again." I for one hope so, though it would be helpful to know more precisely from where it might rise and into what. It seems altogether possible that it may do so in ways not anticipated by Mr. Corish nor, for that matter, myself.

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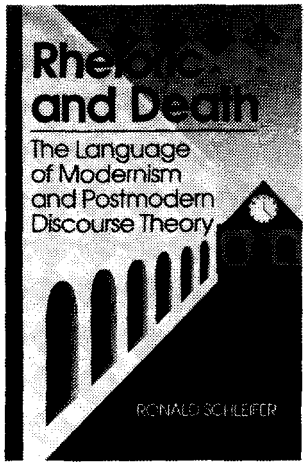

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Comment:

All Aboard Amtrak

LAST SPRING MY WIFE (hereafter M.) and I returned from a three-week trip across the country and back, something that every red-blooded American is supposed at some point to do, usually by car or accompanied by children. Since I prefer back roads to freeways, the thought of a 3000-mile trip with three boys in the back seat who weren't always angelic in their behavior, used immediately to exhaust me. So we stayed home, and although I'd flown to Seattle once, had never laid eyes on California—indeed seen nothing much west of Chicago. Of late, M. had been pushing the idea of a trip by train, and before that, for years, my mother would sing the praises of a couple of ones she'd taken, first with my father then with her own father. The one with my father—which she must have worked hard at to persuade him to undertake, since he was a fearful traveler—was made shortly before he died; since I'm about as old as he was when he made the train trip, that seemed a reason for me to undertake it, then try to remain alive afterwards. Our circumstances were ideal: M. was between jobs and I had a semester's leave with a book about to appear. What better time to discover America?

The friendly travel agent worked out a scheme by which we could do the whole thing, with frequent stops, for a not impossible sum. The plan was to head for Seattle, stopping at Chicago and Salt Lake City overnight; then fly to San Francisco from Seattle (our sole capitulation to the friendly skies); then get back on the tracks east, with overnights at Flagstaff (Grand Canyon) and St. Louis. Whenever possible we would travel deluxe, meaning a compartment with our very own toilet and shower (larger than the economy compartments), also meal vouchers (paid for in advance on the ticket) and, before dinnertime, a complimentary Wine and Cheese Package plus a small bottle each of California red or white. Such favors however would only begin west of Chicago.

In fact our first thought had been to fly to Chicago and board the train there. For years we'd heard traveling wisdom that the roadbed was especially rough between Albany and Chicago and the equipment antiquated. (The latter is true, though Amtrak hoped to upgrade it soon.) But it seemed like cheating not to begin near home, even though the Amtrak station in Springfield, Mass. is one of the more depressing train depots to be found, its once impressive building now mostly closed, with a small not-very-clean portion left to serve

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passengers. Why not begin at Springfield? We would have no place to go thereafter but up. Accordingly, courtesy of one of the children we weren't taking along, we were driven to Springfield early on a Sunday evening, for our 7:40 P.M. departure. Amtrak has no dining car until after Albany, when the cars from New York get hooked on and the Lake Shore Limited reaches its full size. This gave us the excuse to create a sendoff picnic for ourselves, with cold chicken and ham sandwiches, pickles, grapes, ushered in—for me—with a symbolic but also real martini. So as the train rattled out of the station across the Connecticut River to West Springfield, then headed through a darkened Western Massachusetts, we toasted the fitness of things and the leaving behind of family, friends, a less than half-completed *Hudson* fiction chronicle, and the Boston Celtics with two weeks of their regular season to go.

At Albany (actually Rensselaer, since the noble old Albany station was boarded up years ago) we debarked from our coach and when the New York component was hitched on proceeded to occupy our first and least distinguished sleeping quarters. The Slumber Coach, as it is euphemistically and quite incorrectly named, consisted of two facing seats which convert into upper and lower minimally-padded bunks. At one's literal, not proverbial, elbow (or face depending on whether you're sitting or lying down) is a trusty toilet with collapsible sink poised above. Immediately it was evident that close living with one's partner was the only way, and that it would be best to avoid serious spats with a loved one on Amtrak. I attempted, gallantly as always, to cram myself into the upper berth, but even though I'm under six feet it simply wouldn't do. So M. agreed to climb up top, though in the deluxe accommodations to come I insisted on that privilege. I had scoffed at people who made much of the discomforts of train-sleeping, yet there could be no doubt that a Slumber Coach promoted little slumber. Tired as I was, I stayed awake for stretches of jolting, crashing minutes as the Lake Shore Limited screamed across upstate New York in the morning's wee hours. Was this really a good idea after all?

Amtrak's breakfast next morning made everything all right again; in fact, given my tastes in the culinary line, I couldn't have lost in the dining car. With the exercise of immense restraint I manage, in my own kitchen, not to cook bacon every day upon arising; but on holiday I never turn down what the menu referred to as "breakfast meats" (the sausages were also delicious), well-cooked eggs, and—when they were available—excellent grits. Lunch was rather a free-for-all but for dinner one made reservations, since there were as many as three sittings. It was tempting just to eat steak across America; along with prime rib, invariably excellent, it was a feature of every evening's menu. One night the special was braised short ribs: delicious, but of course not in tune with enlightened eating habits—which was fine by

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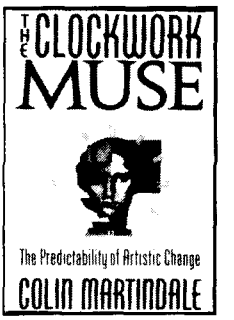

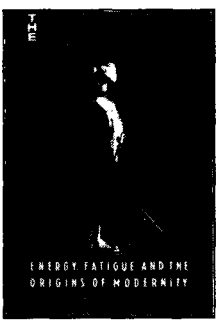

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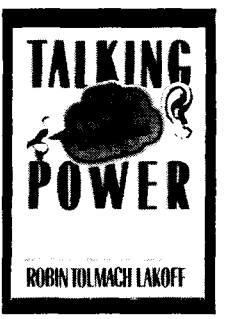

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me. If one's taste is less along the red meat line, there is always chicken and the Catch of the Day, usually halibut or swordfish. And even, sign of the times, a vegetarian special. The dining car was always full and we were regularly placed across from one or another couple. This proximity at first filled me with dismay, but M.'s open manner and reportorial interests broke the ice, and I managed a few grunts of assent from time to time. The dining car is a good place for what Saul Bellow calls Potato love; afterwards you decide that most unlikely people are really quite . . . well . . . *human*. At any rate, we had nothing but pleasant encounters at mealtime.

Not as much can be claimed for the shower which would be ours in the deluxe accommodation we occupied west of Chicago. I had anticipated it as a diminished but still viable version of the one in my bathroom at home. In fact the deluxe compartment, roomier than the Slumber Coach, separates sink and toilet, with the latter a rather opened coffin-like space on which you can close the door. Above the toilet proper is a portable shower nozzle and it is suggested that one stand up, hold that object above one's head, then press a button on the wall which will release water over one's grateful body for about thirty seconds. ("If you must sit . . . " say the directions rather annoyedly, telling you how to proceed in that case.) I determined to give it a whirl (M. said she'd forego the thrill) and was quite disappointed when only a few drops leaked out, about enough perhaps to wet an ear or one of your shoulders, depending on where you held the nozzle. It was my first and last Amtrak shower. At any rate I did not make the mistake of pressing the shower button when attempting to flush the toilet, since such a wetting would have been both inadequate and unwelcome.

We had been warned of this last peril by our first Train Attendant (TA's they're called) who, as all TA's are supposed to do, introduced himself upon our departure from Albany. Dick Holt, for that was his name, turned out to be a good deal more interesting than anything he told us about the room. A rookie train attendant, with just a few months on the job after his retirement from thirty years of practicing dentistry, he had always had this hankering to work on a train, so upon retirement put in his name. At the moment he was working the New York–Chicago route (so many days on, a few days off) but had aspirations for the California Zephyr, the Chicago–San Francisco train. Being a TA is hard work, especially when Amtrak is crowded—as it was for almost all of our trip. Again, the mystery of human desire: here was this well-spoken, humorous man (the most articulate Amtraker we encountered), married, children grown up, approaching sixty, years of presumably profitable dentistry behind him (M. suggested that he decided to quit when he was ahead—no malpractice suit), now taking on a most extraordinary second career. That this career involved a lot of picking up after people not always of the nicest sort, surely, and putting up and taking down the heavy beds

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that inhered in the wall, seemed not to bother him in the least. He had stories to tell, one a quite fine one about a fat woman who got stuck in one of the bathrooms and how could they possibly extricate her. When we got off the train I wondered whether I should tip him. We decided not to. He seemed more like a colleague, remarked M. astutely.

Both my mother and an older friend at Amherst had told me not to take too many books along: "You'll want to look out the window," was their way of encouraging me to do something different,—see the country instead of turning pages. Nevertheless I brought along some fairly compact and substantial novels: a never-read late Trollope, *Mr. Scarborough's Family*; Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, last opened in graduate school; and P. D. James's *Innocent Blood* to see if it was as good as I'd remembered. For something really far away, I threw in my little World Classics first volume of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. None of these had anything to do with a trip west, and I kept thinking of other more "appropriate" titles I could have brought along: Major Powell's account of his voyage down the Colorado River; Hammett or Chandler for California-urban; *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which I might, who knows, finally have finished while traveling across Arizona–New Mexico. On the other hand it was pleasant to engage with social Trollope while alternately looking out on the unsocial sublime wonders of landscape in Colorado or Utah.

We had cleverly planned our trip so as not to spend more than one night in a row on the train, which meant that we never suffered long from T. G. (train or terminal grubbiness). A related bit of cleverness was to get friends—a number of them former students of mine—to drive us around different cities. So after spending a morning doing, by car, ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago or San Francisco, or being taken high into the mountains around Salt Lake City, one returned to the train refreshed, ready to face one's next compartment or even, perhaps, "Grandma Amtrak's Famous Spaghetti and Meatballs" (famous, no doubt, for the presence of four large meatballs in a portion). We were not, however, totally parasitic upon others for transportation. In San Francisco we rented a car and drove north in brilliant sunny weather, over the Golden Gate, up Mt. Tamalpais, down into the Muir Woods and up again, along the coast to Bodega Bay, chosen for a night's domicile because of its spectacular role in Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Travel has its odd juxtapositions, and between Bodega Bay and Petaluma we stopped for lunch in a restaurant called (what else) the Little Amsterdam, featuring spectacular barbecued oysters and full of Mexicans downing platefuls of them on the sunporch. But also lots of Delftware on view, just to let you know the owner was a Dutchman. Later, ensconced in a sort of fake-Southern hostelry outside of Napa (named Bowen Manor, it attempted a Gracious Atmosphere) we asked the proprietor for a likely place to have dinner and were told

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that if we were inclined toward something "bohemian" we might investigate the downtown area. There was, thankfully, no bohemian life, in fact hardly any life at all in Saturday night deserted, downtown Napa, but the Mexican restaurant was first rate.

The curse of much travel writing is of course that the traveler puts too rosy a face on the whole business. Just as, before we left, everyone had assured us that we would have a *wonderful* time—whether or not they'd had any experience on Amtrak—so in writing about a trip one may feel compelled to be upbeat about everything. I've been known to have downbeat moments, and M. noted a couple of points during the trip when I became what she called the Gloomy Traveler, radiating mistrust, disapproval, and general ill-humor. The time aboard Amtrak when I most lost my composure, such as it is, was a twelve-hour coach ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles preparatory to catching the sleeper to Flagstaff. The people responsible for my fit of, shall we say, melancholy, got on in Santa Clara and were identified as the Spanish Heritage Society. They were a group of vigorous (yea, vigorous) men and women in their sixties and beyond, retired, well-enough-to-do, and bound for an eighteen-day train and bus tour to visit such sites as Elvis Presley's shrine, Disney World, and other glamour spots. That morning they were in the first flush of enthusiasm at the whole project, and their behavior and conversation was such as (to use a locution of Randall Jarrell's) made you disbelieve in the existence of, say, Proust. They chattered and honked and screamed with laughter, committed wink-wink nudge-nudge sexual innuendos about each other, especially about one Julio, evidently the group's leading rogue. They loudly pointed out things in the passing landscape (look at those goats! Ho, ho), constantly went on pilgrimages to other cars then came back to report what they'd seen and to be filled in on what had transpired in their absence. *No sleeping on this trip!* was their reiterated slogan—especially as it concerned Julio. I identified deeply with the surly Australian girl across the aisle who kept casting baleful looks back at them. But they were not to be dealt with by looks, not at all. I consoled myself that they were inexperienced in Amtrak life and that a first night of trying to wedge into their economy-style compartments (as I later found they occupied) would bring them up against grimmer realities, perhaps even make them less eager to investigate—if that is what presumably they were doing on this jaunt—their Spanish Heritage.

During the trip's last week I began to yearn for the Celtics, about to kick off their series against the Knicks. (In Seattle, on Easter morning while some went to church, I watched Boston annihilate New York, the game beginning—strangely, out there in the Pacific time zone—at 10 A.M.) Also, that week, we had to get up three days running at 6 A.M. in order to catch or depart from trains. This provoked not gloom but sleepiness in me, and on our day tour of the Grand Canyon (the only

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"tour" of the trip) I fell asleep while the driver passed along information and mother-in-law jokes, and I later regarded the jewelry and other items at the Indian reservation in Cameron, Arizona (a forced stop on the tour) with utmost non-interest. On the way back from the Canyon there was another stop for the purpose of viewing a half-hour film on the place, but I chose, ingloriously, to stay on the bus for a fine twenty-minute nap. There was an older man in front of me who also stayed on, and when his wife returned from the viewing she asked him chirpily, "Did you have a nap?" to which he replied, with some annoyance, "No, of course not." Probably the most agreeable train nap I took was on the Amtrak branch (only five cars on the train) that got us from Kansas City to St. Louis. Departing K.C. in the morning, I paid homage to Evan Connell's wonderful novel, *Mrs. Bridge*, probably by this time a major motion picture with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward unlikely stand-ins for the hero and heroine. But with the book in mind it was impossible not to regard the two impeccably costumed ladies across the aisle—just about the only people we'd seen on the trains who were "dressed up"—as members of Mrs. Bridge's circle. They were headed for St. Louis, and along the way, as the train stopped at Independence and Jefferson City and Sedalia, they got up to look out the window, on the chance that some of their friends might have come down to the station for a look at them. No such luck, however.

At Chicago we boarded, once more, the Lake Shore Limited, now headed the other way, and came to terms, once more, with the same version of Slumber Coach we'd had on the Albany–Chicago run three weeks before. As always, this close to the end of a trip, I counted the minutes, and waking at 5 A.M. or so spent a good deal of time doing what one is supposed to do, if one can, from his train bunk—staring out the window. This I could now do since I was back, courtesy of Slumber Coach dimensions and M.'s cooperation, in the bottom berth. Was that Erie, Pennsylvania, out there with all those oil derricks, or some other bit of industrial waste? As it grew light enough to make things out, I saw a forlorn roadhouse advertising Genesee Beer (it was Sunday morning, they had been closed but a few hours) and figured that, surely, we were in The Empire State. This was confirmed when the Buffalo station appeared, located, of course, at DePew, N.Y. We had the proverbial last breakfast and hurtled across the satisfactions of upstate New York, the Mohawk River, the viewed backsides of Utica and Canajoharie and Schenectady. Don't the wheels make a sound that goes Schenectady, Schenectady, Schenectady? When we changed trains from the Springfield–Boston coach that would be our final carriage, I saw *Times* sports headlines announcing that the Celtics had shellacked the Knicks in the second game. More of that was in store, I decided, never more mistakenly.

Viewed from the train, as I'd never done before, the landscape of

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Western Massachusetts, for variety and general handsomeness if not for sublimity, held its own with Colorado and New Mexico. I felt, truly, as if I were seeing it for the first time. And not even the still-extant Springfield hovel into which, eventually, we slowly rolled, could spoil things. "*Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?*" asks Elizabeth Bishop in "Questions of Travel." The answer, it appeared was—well no, not this time.

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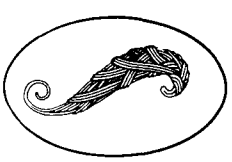

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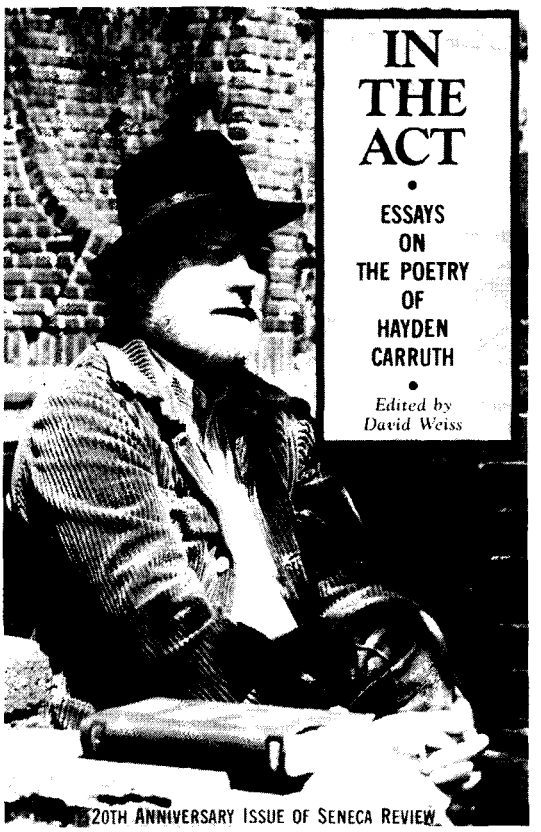

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MONROE K. SPEARS

The Poetics of the New Formalism

It is hard to know how to address an audience which may possibly contain the odd New Formalist or fellow traveler, but certainly contains some people who have never heard of New Formalism.[1] If I talk mostly about recent books that cast light on this movement, I can hope at least to serve the journalistic function of bringing everyone up to date on the latest developments.

The New Formalist movement, according to its leaders, began in 1981. Its chief manifesto so far is a book called *Expansive Poetry*, edited by Frederick Feirstein (a New York psychoanalyst and poet) and published in 1989 by Story Line Press, Inc., of Santa Cruz, California.[2] Though the book is published by a small press, the movement has been widely recognized: many of the essays appeared earlier in the 1980s in such highly respected periodicals as *Poetry*, the *Kenyon*, *Sewanee*, *Hudson*, *Georgia*, and *Threepenny Reviews*, *Verse*, and *Crosscurrents*, all of which have also been hospitable to poetry by the essayists. The book subdivides Expansive Poetry into the New Narrative and the New Formalism. There are essays on the New Narrative by Dana Gioia, Richard Moore, Christopher Clausen, Dick Allen, Mark Jarman, Robert McDowell (who is editor and publisher of Story Line Press and co-editor, with Jarman, of *The Reaper*); essays on the New Formalism are by Paul Lake, Timothy Steele, Gioia again, Wyatt Prunty, Robert McPhillips, Ernst Pöppel, and Frederick Turner. The introduction, by Turner and Feirstein, who seem to be the most active organizers of the movement, begins by making such grandiose claims that it sets an unfortunate tone for the volume: "We have just passed through a great change both in poetic fashion and

[1] "The Poetics of the New Formalism" was a lecture given at the Sewanee Writers' Conference on July 24, 1990.

[2] Now of Brownsville, Oregon.

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in the underlying cultural and philosophical assumptions of poetry. . . . This book of essays is a record of that part of that struggle; it represents the position which, at first attacked from all sides, was eventually to prevail and establish itself." Turner, a former editor of the *Kenyon Review*, also collaborated with Pöppel, a psychophysicist, in the final essay, which makes equally inflated claims: it attempts to prove scientifically that metered poetry may "act as a technique to concentrate and reinforce our uniquely human tendency to make sense of the world in terms of values like truth, beauty, and goodness," bringing together the two sides of the the brain in the most salutary manner, whereas free verse "is nicely adapted to the needs of the bureaucratic and even the totalitarian state. . . ." One half expects the final point to be that free verse causes cancer.

Expansive Poetry contains much vigorous polemic against the flabbiness and formlessness of contemporary free verse (verse only to the eye, the essayists often suggest, as Dr. Johnson said of blank verse) and the metrical ignorance of contemporary poets. Some of the essayists assert that they differ from the older formalists in being less arty and academic and élitist and European, using fewer allusions, being closer to the business world, the popular arts, and the common man, more colloquial and American. They advocate narrative, meter, rhyme, and traditional stanza forms.

A few preliminary observations may be ventured about the poetry (not in this volume, of course) of some of the contributors. All of them write more frequently in strict forms than has been customary, and this is, of course, the essential characteristic they share. Dana Gioia, for example (not an academic, but a New York businessman), writes mostly in blank verse in the genres established by Frost and Robinson. Like McDowell and Feirstein he uses notably vivid, colloquial, tough, even streetwise language. Timothy Steele writes accomplished verse in a variety of fixed forms, including that most difficult one, the Sapphic (*Sapphics against Anger*, 1989). Feirstein's *Manhattan Carnival* is written in fluent rhymed couplets, and recent *Hudson Reviews* have contained excellent poems by Dick Allen reviving the *ottava rima* and *rispetto* forms with much success, and by Dana Gioia in unrhymed pentameter tercets. Frederick

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Turner's *The New World* is "an epic poem" of 182 pages, set 400 years in the future; Turner says in an introductory note: "As Aeneas' journey to Italy gives meaning to the Rome of Virgil and Augustus, so *The New World*'s future makes sense of our present." (Turner, as we have seen, is not averse to the making of large claims.) Its meter is enjambed pentameter with a caesura and a varying number of unstressed syllables; in any other context, I might have called it free or loose. At any rate, it is surprisingly readable. Robert McDowell's *Quiet Money* (1987) is an interesting story of a bootlegging pilot who anticipated Lindbergh's feat but was obliged to forego the glory. Long verse narratives by poets not in this volume have met with some acclaim: for example, Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986). I do not, however, have the impression that either the New Narrative or the New Formalism has yet had much success in capturing a wider audience for poetry. Unfortunately, Howard Nemerov's observations of thirty years ago appear to be still true: "Almost no one reads poetry who does not also write it. Many people who write poetry evidently do not read it."

Aside from their joint abhorrence of the dominant contemporary fashion for short confessional free verse lyrics, it is never very clear, in *Expansive Poetry*, what the two branches—New Narrative and New Formalism—have in common. This and many other questions are answered by the new book by Timothy Steele, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter*.[3] Steele's book is a full-dress exposition of the poetics of the movement, treating its background historically and theoretically, and buttressed by scholarly documentation.

Considering first how the modern revolution in English and American verse differed from earlier revolutions, Steele argues that Pound and Eliot "identified the florid idiom characteristic of much Victorian verse with meter itself. As a result, they believed that in order to get rid of Victorian style they had also to get rid of meter. . . ." They "identified meter not only with Victorian style, but also with a method of reading aloud and scanning English verse that had developed in the nineteenth

[3] MISSING MEASURES: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter, by *Timothy Steele*. University of Arkansas Press. $22.95; $12.95.

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century. This method . . . involved speaking lines of verse in a heavily artificial and sing-song way to bring out their metrical identity." "This method . . . obliterates . . . natural degrees of relative speech stress within lines, and it produced a widespread feeling that conventional verse was necessarily 'metronomic' and 'rigid.' This feeling in turn produced the belief that to introduce rhythmical life into verse, one needed to depart to some degree from metrical norms." The "modern revolutionaries did not entirely recognize what they were doing"; "they believed they were merely engaging in the kinds of necessary renovations of poetic speech that poets must undertake from time to time to keep poetry vital . . ." But, because they identified diction with meter and meter with scansion, "they deposed meter in the course of deposing Victorian style."

Steele next considers "what other factors gave rise to and supported the concept of free verse." Modern poets commonly urge that if poetry is to recover the material it has lost to prose fiction, it must assimilate characteristics of the novel. They think "that verse might profitably be written as the novel is written—without meter." The modern distinction between "verse" and "poetry" is a distortion, according to Steele: the "commonplace that poetry is something *more* than meter is transformed into the idea that poetry is something *other* than meter." This notion is implicit, he says, in Eliot's discussions of the music of poetry. (I omit Steele's historical argument—which seems to me very dubious—about how the distinction between verse and poetry originated in the Renaissance conflation of Aristotle's *Poetics* with Quintilian, Servius, and Plutarch; the conflation was responsible, he says, for the notion that imitation is more important to poetry than is verse.)

Steele proceeds to discuss aesthetic theory from Kant onwards, to show how aestheticism contributes to the rise of nonmetrical poetry. The "aesthetic doctrine that poems are 'autonomous' creations results in an emphasis on internal as opposed to external qualities of poetry"; "the free verse movement involves, in Eliot's words, 'an insistence upon the inner unity which is unique to every poem, against the outer unity which is typical.' If every poem is defined in terms of an independent internal unity, it follows that every poem may or even should create its own prosody." Furthermore, in "elevat-

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ing music as the purest of the arts, writers in the aesthetic tradition . . . almost unanimously explain the medium in terms of music, and they argue that what free verse lacks in metricality it makes up for in musicality."

Lastly, Steele treats the influence of modern science on poetry. "By the end of the nineteenth century, it is widely argued that art, in order to insure itself a central position in modern culture, should attempt to achieve the kinds of quantitative progress of which science is capable. Poetry, it is said, should be 'experimental' and produce 'breakthroughs' and 'discoveries.'" Hence poets seek novelty in the structural elements of their art, in technical innovation. "Such notions are detrimental to conventional versification because they imply that meter is intellectually backward. . . ." Science also encourages "the notion that the literary past is, like the scientific past, largely irrelevant to present practice." While Pound and Eliot "sincerely professed an allegiance to tradition," the "model of science persuaded them that in breaking with conventional versification, they were contributing to 'progress.' . . ."

Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Steele says, "provides an acute analysis of the modern attempt to make art 'scientific'" and shows how "it has tended to derail, paradoxically, into magic and barbarism." "Though the modernists abandoned meter out of a genuine wish to renovate verse and reconnect it to a real world and a real audience, the effect to a great extent has been to deprive poetry of resources that enable it to examine human experience appealingly, distinctively, and meaningfully."

I have summarized Steele's book at such length (using, wherever possible, his own words) because it expounds the poetics that seems to be accepted and practiced by many of the New Formalists. It is a formidable indictment of modernist poetics as based on historical confusions and fundamental misconceptions.

It seems to me, however, that Steele's argument is based on several dubious assumptions and oversimplifications. To suggest that Eliot and Pound did not understand traditional accentual-syllabic English meter and that they wanted to abolish it is preposterous. In his first critical book, *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry* (1917), Eliot makes his interpretation crystal clear: "The freedom of Pound's verse is rather a state of tension

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due to constant opposition between free and strict. There are not, as a matter of fact, two kinds of verse, the strict and the free; there is only a mastery which comes of being so well trained that form is an instinct and can be adapted to the particular purpose in hand." Pound is no free-verse fanatic, but revived purely accentual verse in his translation of "The Seafarer," and classical quantitative verse (Sapphics) in "Apparuit," in addition to such Provençal forms as the sestina (in "Altaforte") and the alba. He kept the sonnet alive in "A Virginal" and other examples. He also wrote genuinely free verse that even Yeats admired in "The Return" and Eliot's kind of loose pentameter with occasional rhyme in many early poems. In "Reflections on Vers Libre" (1917) Eliot made his famous comment that *vers libre* "is a battle-cry of freedom, and there is no freedom in art." Describing (as we can see now) his own practice, he argues that "the most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language has been done either by taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse." He concludes that "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or, freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation." "So much for metre. There is no escape from metre; there is only mastery."

Steele's book appears to assume throughout a false dichotomy between metrical and non-metrical verse, ignoring or banishing the quasi-metrical, which is the dominant form for most good modernist verse. These terms are not absolutes; a poem is not simply either/or, formal or free; there is a gradual shading between the two terms. There are many degrees of freedom or looseness or individuality between the strict following of a traditional form and the total absence of form. The two extremes—perfect embodiment of an abstract and regular form and complete absence of pattern—are extremely rare; some would say, impossible. Every real poem is individual in its balance of these two aspects, meter and other patterns and

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unique and peculiar characteristics, in its sound and meaning, in its relation to the past and the present.

To take arms against the sea of "free" verse in the name of strict meter and fixed forms is a posture as foolish as Canute's; of "free" verse in this sense there is, not a threatening and formless sea or an indistinguishable chaos, but an almost infinite number of kinds, degrees, qualities, and shadings. The great body of modern verse in English exists in a tension between the two poles.

Steele's basic oversimplification is this assumption that free verse is illegitimate, is merely prose, and therefore anathema. But by no means all of the New Formalists share Steele's scorn of free and quasi-metrical verse, since many of them write in free and loose forms as well as closed or fixed. Dana Gioia, for example, upholds both options in his own writing as well as in his criticism: "In my own poetry I have always worked in both fixed and open forms. Each mode opened up possibilities of style, subject, music, and development the other did not suggest, at least at that moment. Likewise experience in each mode provided an illuminating perspective on the other. Working in free verse helped keep the language of my formal poems varied and contemporary, just as writing in form helped keep my free verse more focused and precise. I find it puzzling therefore that so many poets see these modes as opposing aesthetics rather than as complementary techniques. Why shouldn't a poet explore the full resources the English language offers?"

To portray formalism, or its revival, as *new*, Steele must ignore the considerable number of first-rate American poets who have been writing formal (and often also quasi-formal and free) verse since the Second World War. Obvious examples are Howard Nemerov, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Mona Van Duyn, Donald Justice, John Hollander, X. J. Kennedy, Daniel Hoffman, William Meredith, Robert Pack, and Edgar Bowers, among many others. (We might call them Old Formalists, but they might well not like it.) Steele says only that "following the Second World War, there was a metrical revival. This, however, was short-lived. In the late fifties . . . poetry again swung away from meter." (Steele has, in fact, a remarkably short list of "brilliant practitioners of traditional versifica-

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tion": Frost, Yeats, Auden, Cunningham, Wilbur, Larkin, and Gunn.)

In contrast to this attitude of rigorously exclusive orthodoxy, let us consider the very important and influential anthology *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms.*[4] This collection was edited by Philip Dacey and David Jauss in 1985 not to promote a school but to show that good formal poetry has been written all along in the reign of free verse. It was intended not so much as an answer as a complement to Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey's *Naked Poetry* of 1969 and their later *New Naked Poetry* (1976). Neither Dacey and Jauss nor the poets they sponsor want to require programmatically that poets always write in traditional forms; in fact, many of the poets in their volume also appeared in *Naked Poetry.* But they want poets to feel free to write in fixed forms and use regular meter and even rhyme if they want to.

Limitation makes for power; as Richard Wilbur says, the genie's strength "comes of his being confined in a bottle." But this metaphor is slightly misleading, because most contemporary poets distort the bottle, sometimes making it unrecognizable or concealing it. Dacey and Jauss show how the poets, far from simply using traditional forms unchanged, disguise them, graft free verse onto them, alternate them with free verse, shift stanzaic patterns, create hybrid forms, invert or truncate or extend them, and invent nonce forms. Dacey and Jauss do not argue for the elimination of free verse or the prose poem; they want only to make them no longer compulsory but one possible option among many for the poet.

As just noted, *Naked Poetry* and *Strong Measures* are by no means totally unlike. They contain many of the same poets: Roethke, Stafford, Kees, Berryman, Lowell, Levertov, Creeley, Ginsberg, Kinnell, Merwin, Wright, Levine, Plath, Snyder, and Mezey. In fact, the only ones in *Naked Poetry* who are *not* in *Strong Measures* are Berg, Bly, Patchen, and Rexroth. (There are, of course, a great many in *Strong Measures* who are not in *Naked Poetry.*) Some of the poets in *Naked Poetry* (whose subtitle is Poetry in *Open* Forms, not *no* forms) do in fact use meter and

[4] *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, ed. by Philip Dacey and David Jauss (New York, 1985).

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even rhyme: for obvious examples, Sylvia Plath, Lowell, Berryman, and Stafford.

Let me cite one last anthology. In *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms* (1987),[5] David Lehman presents sixty-five contemporary poets whom he persuaded to select and comment on one of their own poems. The question he asked them to address was, "What is *form*, what is it that at all holds poems together?" His single generalization about their answers is expressed in his title, derived, of course, from Marianne Moore's "Ecstasy affords the occasion and expediency determines the form": form, he comments, "proceeds not from theory but from the pressures of a specific occasion. Talking about their poems, most poets are empiricists, and it cannot surprise us to find one poet after another eschewing lofty pronouncements in favor of expedient explanations." Lehman's book is far more tolerant than any of the anthologies we have mentioned; it includes some stuff that seems weird or startling even at this late date. It contains no professed New Formalists, but numerous older ones, and as one might expect, they make some of the most interesting comments. Anthony Hecht, for instance, describes the advantages of form to the poet: form "slows the poet in his tracks, makes him examine the few words with which he began, and discover what their potentials might actually be. The effect on him should not be hobbling, but, on the contrary, liberating. He will be invited to discover meanings or implications he had never considered before. In this way the 'unforeseen' emerges from the small germ of the beginning, and therefore seems precisely 'predestined.'"

Richard Wilbur stresses the similarities, rather than the differences, between his procedures and those of the writers of free verse. "Though I commonly work in meters, my way of going about a poem is very like the free-verse writer's: that is, I begin by letting the words find what line lengths seem right to them. Often this will result in a stanza of some sort, which (though the ensuing stanzas keep the metrical pattern) will still be flexible enough to permit the argument to move and speak as it likes. All of my poems, therefore, are formally *ad hoc*; quite

[5] *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, ed. by David Lehman (New York & London, 1987).

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a few are, so far as I know, without formal precedent, and none sets out to fulfill the 'rules' of some standard form." Like Hecht, he points out the usefulness of a set form in challenging the poet even when it is not perceptible to the reader: "There are poems like Auden's marvelous 'In Praise of Limestone' in which we simply do not hear the syllabic structure. . . . This inaudibility is not a defect, since the poet was after resistance and self-discipline rather than a clear quantitative effect." But of his own poem, the beautiful "Thyme Flowering among Rocks," in rhymed haikus, Wilbur says, "What I hope to have got in my little experiment is a quantitative structure of which the reader will be aware, playing against a speech rhythm which carries the motion and emotion." In an interview he remarks, "I do think it's perfectly possible to write satisfactory poems in free verse. It does, however, depress me to hear good people . . . say that we're beyond all that formal stuff now. . . . It seems to me that traditional means, if you have the ability to use them, can be turned to enormous account; that there are many effects you can get with them that you can't possibly get without them."

In spite of inflated rhetoric on both sides, then, there should be no real war between free and fixed, open and closed verse, and there need be no battle cries. The extreme case of freedom in verse is that of D. H. Lawrence. Pound disliked him, perhaps because he detected Lawrence's affinity with the Italian Futurists, against whom Pound campaigned at length and effectively. Like them, and in contrast to Pound, Lawrence is an apostle of historical discontinuity, eager to discard the past and committed to the future. His aim as poet is to capture the shimmer of the immediate present, not in order to preserve it but to experience it more fully. Prophetically, Lawrence uses a spatial metaphor to describe the actual movement of his verse: "I think I read my poetry more by length than by stress—as a matter of movements in space rather than footsteps hitting the earth"; "I think more of a bird with broad wings flying and lapsing through the air than anything, when I think of meter. . . ."

The contrast with Yeats, for example, is striking. Temporal rhythm for him is fundamental, and the tension between regular pattern and individual or personal speech. Yeats writes: "I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional. . . . Talk to me of originality and I will

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turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing." Again, he says that the "contrapuntal structure of the verse . . . combines the past and present. If I repeat the first line of *Paradise Lost* so as to emphasize its five feet I am among the folk singers . . . but speak it as I should I cross it with another emphasis, that of passionate prose . . . ; the folk song is still there, but a ghostly voice, an unvariable possibility, an unconscious norm. What moves me and my hearer is a vivid speech that has no laws except that it must not exorcise the ghostly voice. I am awake and asleep, at my moment of revelation; self-possessed in self-surrender; there is no rhyme, no echo of the beaten drum, the dancing foot, that would overset my balance." I have quoted this rather long passage because it seems to me to put very eloquently just what is lost by Lawrence's kind of free verse: the ghostly voice in it is exorcised, and also the echoes of the beaten drum and the dancing foot, though Lawrence sometimes tries to get them back by describing them.

Pound and Eliot were right in their comments made when the early enthusiasm for free verse was at its height: the point is not whether verse is formal or free, but whether or not it is good. The balance or tension between the two—form and freedom—is individual for each poet, and finding the right kind is a fundamental part of achieving one's own voice and style. Doctrinaire prescriptions are irrelevant or harmful. A conscious effort to be either formal or free is not likely to help a poet. But the possibilities of poetry are certainly diminished by ignorance of form or programmatic hostility to it; and dedication to freedom may, if extreme, sacrifice that tension or counterpointing that is one of the subtlest and most profound pleasures of poetry.

Wyatt Prunty's remarkable new book, "*Fallen from the Symboled World*," aligns itself with this current of interest and debate by its subtitle, *Precedents for the New Formalism*.[6] Prunty argues that the real issue for contemporary poetry is trope or mode of thought, not form; and that the "likening process provided by poetic language is the real justification for poetry." The poets

[6] "FALLEN FROM THE SYMBOLED WORLD": Precedents for the New Formalism, by *Wyatt Prunty*. Oxford University Press. $29.95.

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he discusses are not those labeled New Formalists but their predecessors—though many of them are, fortunately, still writing as well as ever. These "more established but equally formal contemporary poets" include Howard Nemerov, Mona Van Duyn, Anthony Hecht, Robert Pack, Donald Justice, John Hollander, Richard Wilbur, Elizabeth Bishop, X. J. Kennedy, J. V. Cunningham, Edgar Bowers, and Robert Pinsky. Prunty's thesis, put very briefly, is that the new element that distinguishes these poets from the pre-war Modernists is their replacement of metaphor, symbolism, and allegory by simile-like tropes.

"After World War II, the skepticism about language and meaning that made poets . . . more apt to base the authority of their poetry on personal experience meant that certain modes of thought prized by modern poets no longer seemed, as they once did, appropriate or accurate. With modernist assumptions about hierarchies set aside, there was no need for the equivalences generated by symbol and allegory. Because the goal of less extensional, more connotative tropes is to discover relation rather than demonstrate equivalence, poetic language has been free to work constitutively, if locally. There have been few positions to be taken, except those that by similitude could open a meaningful free play."

He describes "the move from high modernism, in which the physical and metaphysical worlds were often linked by symbol and allegory, to a postmodern or late-modern understanding that most often denies correspondence between the two—the postmodern or late-modern tools being simile and simile-like tropes that establish resemblance rather than correspondence." Doubt, he comments, "requires modalities that carry no presuppositions; thus tropes that liken have been preferred to those that equate because the ones that employ the equals sign also make assumptions about the priority of those things found on the other side of it." But one of Prunty's virtues is that he does not assume that his poets operate in terms of metaphysical concepts or abstract ideas: "the poets who effected change never enjoyed that perspective. Their use of less extensional tropes in place of symbol and allegory was not done out of the assurance that we had moved from the old world of high modernism to some midair adjustment of postmodernism, or

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late modernism. In comparision to the farsighted scale of such a summary, poets seem to have proceeded like moles.What the best poets have used, however, has been a genius for likening, by which their poems progressed by a kind of line of sight, or lines of sight . . . , they have mostly lived very quietly, while the census takers have surveyed experimentation, revolution, whatever was new." The new good thing that these poets have done, Prunty says, "is to articulate what they lack, which in a way is nothing new at all. Lacking the arrangements of logic, faith, metaphysics, and tradition as reliable bases for judging experience," they make "guarded assessments of experience." But holding what is lacked in question, in play, "keeps the thing missed from being lost. The tropes that liken are the means for exploring similitude. They are also the preliminaries for greater certainty. . . ."

Prunty's book is, however, centrally concerned with form (and especially its metrical aspect) as well as trope, rightly regarding the two as inseparable; and his sensitive and perceptive analyses of the interaction of the two in specific poems are perhaps his most valuable performances. He is fully appreciative of free and quasi-formal, as well as formal, verse; he remarks, perhaps with some intolerant New Formalists in mind, "For many contemporary readers, I would suggest, the degree of tolerance for metrical variation within iambic pentameter and other metrical patterns is considerably narrower than should be the case. Maybe that is the basis for sensitivity about free verse. Given a strict approach to formal verse, free verse looks like the only haven for variations. (But variation is meaningful only when the sort of repetition created by iambic patterning and other meters definite enough to be experienced is maintained.)" And he goes on to argue cogently that Justice's "Thinking about the Past," for example, is "not written in free verse but is a formal poem."

Prunty's ultimate purpose is to define the basic difference between the poetry of the first half of this century and that of the second. It seems to me that he has achieved much greater success in this enterprise than has any other critic, and that he has in his interpretations of individual poems and poets restored the balance from an excessive concern with meter alone to a full appreciation of all aspects.

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To sum up my view of New Formalist poetics so far: one of the chief problems with the movement is the insistence of some of its proponents that formalism *is* new, or that it is a revival rather than a continuation. A second is their reduction of the whole complex matter of form to meter, so that formal means merely metrical. Some of the New Formalists exclude the middle ground between metrical and free verse, arguing that anything other than strictly metered verse in regular stanzas is merely prose. In their attacks upon the dominance of free verse the New Formalists sound sometimes like an oppressed minority demanding affirmative action. At the same time they proudly and inconsistently cite the considerable recognition they have received, including ample publication, honors, and awards.

I certainly do not believe that free verse is more natural or authentic or honest or sincere or democratic than traditional forms; but I don't think it should be denounced as equivalent to original sin or even dangerous to the health. On the other hand, I do not believe that fixed forms make poets or audiences better, morally or politically. Rallying to the defense of meter is not a cause that can inspire wholehearted commitment; meter is simply not the central point, nor are the great moderns and their worthy successors really crippled by any deficiencies in that area.

We should not, however, let our reaction against overkill and exaggerated claims by some neoformalists prevent us from welcoming what does seem to be a trend toward greater awareness of forms other than free verse, nor from remembering that many of the group, together with a much larger number who have affinities with it but no connection, are totally free from such faults.

As Allen Tate once remarked, all roads lead to the problem of form. The problem is not to be solved by any such oversimplification as equating form with meter, or proclaiming an allegiance to or rebellion against form; as well accept or reject the universe. All good poetry has form, but every good poem at once embraces and resists formal order. And every attempt to define form ends in delusion or despair.

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LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

I.V. Runaway

1

Sundown. The windup
of my first day's slithering drives
from one end of Anguilla's twinbeached wriggly-eel
sweep to the other,
both seas visibly ablaze at once
from any land vantage
of the road's sixteen-mile strip (most hills
so shallow, even that indolent one speed pedal biker's
oblivious to dips and rises): we ascend
this low coral isle's
highest bluff, and park at the overlook ledge.
Crocus Hill, two-hundred-sixteen feet
above Crocus Bay,

seems a Carib
Himalaya, though no ears pop for heights
as they do for scuba reef deeps . . . Ten steps back
from mock cliff, we glide
into the Cottage West Hospital wing
that squeezes intensive care
and emergency units into a far corner
cubicle of the neon-glary populous maternity ward—
you leap sideways into my shoulder,
dodging a palmgripped
I.V. bottle swung overhead, trailing a tube
loosely adangle: a forearm which steers
the ambulatory I.V.

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blocks our passage
through the ward door, refusing to make way
for us. Hah! It's no bumpkin of a novice orderly
muddling out the exit
in our startled faces, as I'd guessed,
the yokel leading a wheelchaired
and beltstrapped invalid hooked to serum
bottle: rather, we've met the convalescent herself—
your afflicted pal Jeanne, none other—I read
in your bemused smirk
and snorts of greeting, who wields I.V. flask
with her own upthrust arm (still affixed,
dribbling punctual glops)

like nightwatchman
briskly hefting his lantern aglow;
thin tube losing itself in the flouncy ruffles
of her white negligee,
installed, stubbornly yet, but where?—
in a nondetected site
of lower abdomen, or beyond . . . Jeanne's
been holding court, we see, with eight or nine chums,
cronies in the far-flung social set
of expat photo
journalists, travel writers, etc., that mixed
bag of transients and native islanders.
With her free hand

she waves signals
(choir leader and concertmasterly moves),
directing twin streams of the visitor traffic
flocked around her—indoors
and outdoors, by turns—across the portal,
a nonstop overflow
exodus from the crammed boxy hospital room.
All the while, one matronly silverhaired nurse's aid
keeps trying to wrestle the I.V. bottle

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from her fluttery
grasp, a brief juggling act between our duo
in the overhead ward stratosphere,
the frail vessel

changing hands no less
than seven times, catch as catch can,
airborne twice before the sickening clatter
of smashed glass shards—
mad gush of bilious sticky coagulates
streaming over our footpath.
Thereinafter, we each pick our steps
with care, chary to avoid the tarlike ground patches
gelled to the viscosity of fast-dried
glue, with our sneakers'
soles . . . Granny nursemate desists, at last,
from her futile cat-and-mouse gambits
to wheedle Jeanne

back to her ward cot
for I.V. refittings, when a tallish gangly
white-bewhiskered ink black gent intercepts them
in mid fracas tug-of-war
over the doorsill scrimmage line, hotly grips
the frantic attendant
by the underarm: *all knuckly fists & scowls;*
bleats few words; bristles those white-tipped eyebrows:
darts sprout menace in his forehead's twist
and tilt! He consigns her
to Siberia of reception desk, she admonished
not to desert this clerkly post til day's
end, on pain of. . . .

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2

That knobby bulk
of antique stethoscope, which weighs,
visibly, upon his neck (an old moose's crumply
fallen antlers, a lesser
demon's limp and bedraggled horns), giveaway
he's presiding chief
M.D. of Cottage West Hospital—we're braced
for a wrathful chiding, much provoked by wild filly
of renegade patient, his first, ever,
intensive care escapee
and I.V. runaway . . . But our Jeanne comes off,
in his standup sermonette, as White Duchess
of guests, he Concierge

of a Great Inn,
effusive and fawning in his thanks
for her patronage, she a celebrity and model
visitor to this isle's
most popular villa and social club
entwined—Cottage West!
Quick intros, we to "Royal Crown Colony's
Head Doctor": Jeanne plies unction of civil graces,
her move to tie his hands—not to say tongue—
with clever slipknots
of social amenity, and dismiss him, thus,
with courtly wave of her wrist, or snap
of fingers. But if she's

more adept prattler,
he, suaver yet, outfinesses her—who,
spun about, gently but firmly, like a partner
in tango, lets herself
be swept behind doorjamb: poor woman
taken aside for a verdict,
upshot of his scrupulous cool diagnosis.

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We overhear tag ends of hushed phrases. *No life threat.*
False appendicitis. Just a case of swelled
vessels, inflammation
in your plumbing, he says, winking coyly.
Whazzat? She flushes. *Run that past me*
once more. He matches

her shrill rising voice
with his broadest grin: *INFLAMED FALLOPIAN*
TUBES! Take a holiday from bed sports. She wheezes
a vapid apology,
glum promise of sorts, and darts away
from his long-fingered pinch
of her collar, then draws us after her
withindoors to a low bed at dead center of the mobbed
maternity ward, which might pass for an over-
booked house party.
We three squeeze together, seated on one edge
of Jeanne's bed, while other family
overspills clutter

three sides, hardly space
enough left in mid mattress for her to recline,
with or without her I.V. bottle (long since smashed
and forgotten). Half-dazed,
still, by the doctor's blunt ultimatum
for her near term amours,
Jeanne's distracted—but gives us the lowdown
on her quixotic past forty hours. She can't have slept
"3 winks," what with constant "relay teams of guests,"
many total strangers
asking intimate questions about "my progress,"
all too familiar with the hush-hush
details of her malady.

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3

Ah yes, heard
all about you, don't you know,
the last dreary symptom down to the ground:
or words to that effect,
yet I've never met these folks before.
Everybody else's dirty linen vilely washed
right under my turned-away
nose! Nights, here,
are pandemonium itself, no letup
to inane crises.
All female inmates of any age, from eight
to eighty, are stowed away in *the zoo*:
this free-for-all

maternity
bedlam, a barnyard hodgepodge
lumping all gals into that one ashcan
of mamahood and ageless sex . . .
Last night, four women, in quick conveyor
belt turnover, were frisked and scuttled posthaste
from the oblong delivery table
behind pasteboard
partition—at the ward's far end—
to their recovery beds.
The tots, still half-sticky with birth plasmas
(amniotic fluid, blood and whatnot),
were nestled, already,

in dope-sleep
mom's armpit, or clamped, toothless
gum-gnawing, at one breast. A quartersize
primo runt, blotchy tricolored
ripe for an incubator, rasped for breath
beside a whimpering teenage unwed mother of three.
Fathers, never sent home, are rushed

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to gagaeyed wife's
bedside, like as not carrying newborn
babe laid out flat
on two open palms like a loaf of just-sliced
bread on a platter, or fresh bouquet
of flowers waved

under damsel's
nose for a sample sniff, or taste,
as if she could object to this tart flavor,
that fragrance, and send
the offspring back to the oven for more spice,
caraway seed, a tad more browning for that crust.
Those fathers, I say, have no sense
of timing: slaphappy,
verging on blackout from sleep-lack,
they go stumbling
about the ward dark, trip over wrong beds
(scared sleepers emit wails of outrage),
bump one another, lose

their bearings
on the ward's bed-jumbled layout.
In the wee hours, today, one stocky man fell
foremost upon me, sighing
and chanting his wife's name, over and over,
though I'm sure it was all a ruse to jump my bones,
and no accident. But mostly,
it's your normal
well-meaning blokes who get lost
and crawl haywire
zigzagging the ward. Then, too, a few bozos
get so hot to trot with the missus,
they start to groove—

no mere foreplay,
I tell you—on the next child-to-be.

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Now all's a pawing and pigrooting to drown
those feeble wifely protests,
squelched, at last, in her breathless gasps
and puffs. . . . Many husbands, a few toddlers as well,
are given to endless meanderings
from wall to wall,
corner to corner, in the wavery
bed floor maze: dark
to dawn. Though it may be, now and again,
a ten or twenty minute late respite
from hobblings and gropings

of displaced kinfolks
brings me to the edge of twilight
sleep, light doze, catnap, when I'm stunned
awake: volleys of prayerful
mumblings and incantations! A few oldest
women, side by side, shuffled between new mothers
and the ten-year-old tonsillectomy,
count their rosary
beads, and keep vowing a future
of all good deeds—
one by one by one, in each counted breath:
a chorus, two or three chanting at once . . .
So it is they plead

with a deity
for their recovery from illness:
Please Lord, beat out de devil from me laig
gout; or else, *Keep me alive*
just one more week, one day, six hours.
Click, click, click of the bead prayers, breath counts,
once more, again, and it's daybreak!
By breakfast, scandal
mill's back in full swing: a few newsmen,
toting big cameras
on shoulder or hip, pick their way—crafty and sly—
between beds, chasing down tips on ribald
stories of our day.

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CARL DJERASSI

A Scattering of Ashes

I always dread the question, "Do you have any children?" or as it's phrased in the Orient, "How many children do you have?" Should I say, "a son," and let it go at that? Or should I tell them that once I also had a daughter? If I do, one out of two inquisitors will pursue the topic, usually after an embarrassed look of pity. "How did she die?" is almost bound to follow.

Should I tell them the whole story? How on July 5, 1978, I came home from the lab to the ranch, where I was living alone, to hear from my son-in-law's panicky voice that my daughter Pamela had left a note that morning. It read: "After all my talking with myself, with you, and with others, I have come to the conclusion that today is the day to be my last one alive. I can't go on being useless—I've been paralyzed and inactive with my art for too long and cannot get started again. . . . I've been chronically depressed for years and it's only been getting worse. I just don't want to feel it anymore, or my own guilt at being useless, or my loneliness and isolation. . . . I'm leaving the premises to do my own dying in the woods somewhere because I don't want you to find me. Let someone else do that job. . . ." Ultimately that job fell to me.

Pami's letter was headed "11 A.M." If she had decided on painkillers or sedatives—she had a large supply because of her chronic back pain—then it was crucial to locate her quickly: pumping out her stomach might still save her life. Steve reported that her green '72 Opel station wagon was missing. I called the Sheriff's office, where a sympathetic voice tried to calm me: "In the end, we almost always locate missing cars." "But when?" I wanted to shout. I tried to contact some local radio stations to request that they broadcast a description of the missing car and announce a reward for finding it. But by then it was past 6:00 P.M. and every station I phoned only had recorded messages detailing programs and regular office

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hours. In my panic, it didn't occur to me to call Directory Assistance for some alternative numbers. Instead, Steve and I used the remaining daylight hours to search for the Opel.

Thirteen years earlier, when Pami was fifteen and my son Dale twelve, we had agreed to spend most of our money on some spectacularly beautiful land in the Santa Cruz Mountains, before developers discovered and ruined it. There were redwood forests, deep canyons, sweeping views of the Pacific, deer, coyotes, bobcats—even the occasional mountain lion, and it was only a few miles from Stanford University and a metropolitan area inhabited by several million people. In less than one hour, one could drive from the San Francisco Opera House into the magic solitude that we had named SMIP for *Syntex Made It Possible*—and later renamed *Sic Manebimus In Pace* (Thus We'll Remain In Peace). The first 98 acres we purchased were deep in the forest; over the next few years we acquired additional parcels that extended from the redwoods, through clumps of madrone and oak trees, to the undulating meadows pushing toward the coast. By 1970, SMIP had become a 1200-acre spread—three quarters of it held in the names of my children—on either side of Bear Gulch Road, a winding country road ending at the property of our neighbor, the rock musician Neil Young. On the eastern half of the property, which rises to over 2000 feet and drops to 800 feet within our own confines, we erected a twelve-sided barn and a ranch manager's residence, centered on open grazing land that became the site of a pure-bred, polled Shorthorn cattle operation. On the edge of the redwood forest, we built a small second home, exquisitely designed by Gerald McCue, then chairman of the Architecture Department at the University of California. The setting was so private that one could only reach it by descending, through a screen of bay laurel, live oak, and fir, some 75 irregular steps made from railroad ties. Around the same time, my son, not yet twenty, was the beneficiary of a trust fund based on an early gift in Syntex shares, which had multiplied many times in value. He requested that the bulk of it be used to construct his own hawk-shaped home near a small lake on the western portion of the ranch, an hour's hike from his parent's ranch abode. In 1974, my daughter—then living in La Jolla while her husband

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was finishing medical school—followed suit. Her home and studio went up on the west side of Bear Gulch Road, half an hour's walk from her brother's home. When she sat on one of her hills overlooking the wide expanse of the Pacific, and the ocean wind blew the right way, she could sometimes hear faintly Neil Young rehearse.

Pami and Steve had moved into their ranch home when Steve started his radiology residency at Stanford, where they had met as undergraduates. In July of 1978, I'd been divorced for nearly two years and was also living at SMIP in the redwood house. For well over a decade, we had hiked weekends, and frequently on weekday evenings, all over the property. Still, there were many areas we'd never explored; some sections were simply too rugged or otherwise inaccessible. When, in 1983, I badly fractured my leg while climbing over some fallen logs in a creek bed, it took seven hours for the paramedics and state foresters to transfer me to the Stanford Hospital, during which time I received enough morphine to sedate a couple of adult elephants. If some of my students had not been with me, I would not have been found for days or weeks, and surely would have died.

This was the area that Steve and I had to cover on July 5th in the remaining two to three hours of daylight—he on the west and I on the east side of Bear Gulch Road. I drove along that road and out to Skyline Boulevard, the main north-south access along the ridge of the Santa Cruz Mountains. No green Opel was parked there. Ever more frantic, I covered the interior ranch forest road, which—though unpaved—was accessible to automobiles except in the winter rainy season. When night fell, and we had found nothing, Steve and I realized that the situation was hopeless unless Pami's note had been a hoax.

Since my former wife was then not on speaking terms with me, I phoned her attorney, who had impressed me during our bitter divorce as a warm human being. He discovered that Norma was vacationing in her new Hawaiian home and promised to locate her. My father was traveling in Europe and I simply didn't have the heart to notify him. My son Dale was in Argentina, shooting footage for a documentary on South American soccer. I had the home telephone number of his film

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colleague in the provincial town of San Juan, but I decided not to call him until we were more certain of Pami's fate. In the event, his mother cabled him when she heard, and he flew back immediately.

Years later, Dale told me about some startling coincidences. On July 5, he was filming in the small town of Balcarsi, the site of Argentina's first earth satellite station established to broadcast the soccer world cup events. That night, Dale read Georg Büchner's novella, *Lenz*, based on the sad life and likely suicide of Goethe's friend Jakob Lenz and considered by some the first piece of "modern" prose in German. Büchner, who himself died at age twenty-three, summarizes Lenz's depression in the last sentences of his story. "He did everything that the others did; still there was a dreadful void inside him, he no longer felt any anxiety, nor any desire. His existence was an inevitable burden. And so his life went on. . . ." Dale remembered the terrible nightmare from which he woke the following morning, the sheets twisted, his body soaking wet. When he returned to Buenos Aires and found his mother's cable announcing a family emergency, he made plane reservations for the first flight out. A torrential rainstorm, the worst in years, nearly prevented him from reaching the airport. Two years later, when he met his future wife, he discovered that she had been at the Buenos Aires airport on the same stormy day, sitting at the same time as Dale in that departure lounge, before flying home from a visit to her brother in Argentina.

During the next four days my personal terror and loneliness were so concentrated that I could not begin to face the deeper tragedy of Pami's decision. Early in the morning of July 6, I notified the few ranchers living in the neighborhood as well as Robin Toews, my children's former grade school teacher who had been living with her daughter as a tenant in my former ranch manager's home since the end of the cattle operation in the year of my divorce. All agreed to search; by the end of the day, all had concluded that the green Opel was not on the ranch. In spite of the miles of trails and canyons, and untracked areas where a body could be hidden, only a limited number of sites were accessible to a car. Pami must have driven elsewhere "to do my own dying in the woods. . . ." Her mother clung to

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the hope, reinforced by the advice of some of her friends, that she was just holed up somewhere, perhaps in a motel. Norma had even located a clairvoyant who had promised to use her powers to find Pami. But Steve and I were convinced that Pami had killed herself. But where? What if her car had been stolen after she had left it on the side of some forest road, and the infallible sheriff recovered it, only days or weeks later, at another site, hundreds of miles away? How would we even know where to start the search?

My greatest fear was that I would never know what had happened to my daughter, who, during the past four years, had become my closest friend and only confidante. "In the woods somewhere" didn't have to mean in *our* woods. The Santa Cruz Mountains encompassed miles and miles of uninhabited woods. And what about the Sierras? We used to backpack in Desolation Valley near Lake Tahoe and in the Tuolumne Meadows of Yosemite. Only two winters earlier, Pami and I had gone cross-country skiing for a long weekend near Donner Pass. Pami and I were blessed by one of the most magical winter settings of our experience: blue sky, newly fallen snow covering all but the most recent tracks, the temperature just cold enough to keep us from overheating even after hours of fast skiing. During hours of intimate conversation, in the wood-burning sauna or the hot tub out in the snow under the redwoods, my daughter had turned into a peer, indeed my confessor and advisor. What if she had driven into those mountain woods, two hundred miles north of us?

In the evening of July 9, after four desperate days, I was standing at the sink in the galley kitchen of my house when I suddenly felt that I was not alone. The sun had not yet sunk, but dusk was sufficiently far along among the redwoods surrounding my house that the inside of it was dark except for the kitchen light. I turned toward the glass door to catch the outline of three persons. I couldn't make out the figures, and their total stillness had made my heart miss a beat. Walking toward them, I finally recognized my tenant, her young daughter, and Bob Mann, the manager of the ranch bordering on Pami's side of our property. As I stood before them, the width of the glass separating us, I saw tears in Bob's eyes.

That evening, Bob related, as the falling sun shone horizon-

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tally across the Pacific on an area that he had already passed twice during his searches, he noted in the grass the faint outline of car tracks that had escaped him earlier. Following the tracks down to the edge of the forest, he saw the green Opel partly hidden among some bushes. He then headed straight for my home on the other side of Bear Gulch Road. I immediately called the sheriff and then my son-in-law. Steve asked whether I would do what had to be done.

As a physician, Steve had seen many a corpse, but I had led a remarkably sheltered life in that respect. Although I had escaped Nazi Austria and had traveled all over the globe, I had never seen a person killed by a gun or any other form of violence; until then, in fact, I'd never seen a dead body. Except for the barely-remembered death of my grandmother during my childhood, and my mother's passing at age 91 in a nursing home three thousand miles away, I'd hardly ever *thought* of death. It took my own recovery from a serious cancer operation, seven years later, to face what all of us must face eventually: the ephemeral nature of life and the insignificance of the individual in the scheme of history.

I followed Bob's jeep to the spot where the faint tracks were barely visible in the dusk. He refused to accompany me further, so I walked alone down the golden-brown meadow. Through the Opel's windshield I saw my daughter's lovely face terribly misshapen and bloated; I fled, without opening the car door. Fighting my stiff left leg, I hobbled as quickly as possible to my car and drove off. Interminable minutes later I saw in the distance the flashing lights of the police car and of the ambulance behind.

Until then, I'd hardly ever cried as an adult. But that night, I cried for hours. Even now, eleven years after the event, I weep uncontrolled as I think back to that night, to the horror of that first sight, to the rush of relief that the gnawing uncertainty was over and dawning despair that Pami's suicide was now irrevocable fact.

We agreed that, after the autopsy, Pami's body should be cremated and the ashes spread over the site she loved most—even though I had to lie to accomplish it. A peculiar California law prohibits the open scattering of human ashes anywhere but in the ocean; the progress of "ashes to ashes and dust to dust"

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was illegal in the Golden State. We picked a spot which years earlier Pami and I had declared the most beautiful one at SMIP: a small waterfall, where Harrington Creek ran past many moss-covered rocks and onto a smooth glistening one, shaped like the orifice of a tilted amphora, whence the water shot into a clear pool. Since Harrington Creek eventually enters San Gregorio Creek which terminates in the Pacific, our act was perhaps not wholly outside the law. The spot looked Hawaiian, with huge lush fern on the sides of the pool and the trees forming a natural dome through which the sunlight flickered. Years earlier, on one of our hikes, Pami and I had come upon it. I had decided that this was the place for the eventual disposition of my own ashes, never dreaming that I would pass through the bitterest experience of any parent: to be the survivor, to pick up at the crematorium the cardboard box of my child's ashes.

Diane Middlebrook, who was not yet my wife but who had become one of Pami's few intimates, was present when Steve scattered the ashes onto the shaped rock at the mouth of the waterfall to the sound of some fifteenth-century Sephardic songs, while we dropped flower petals into the rapidly clearing pool. Dale and I held each other—one of the first times since his adolescence—and I begged in a whisper, "Please don't leave me, Dalito." Later Diane wrote "At the Scattering of Ashes":

> This cloud runs in my dreams,
> Part of my bloodstream now:
> Cloudy, then clear, the pool at the foot of the falls—
> A uniform gray: you . . .
> Let it be. But this pure image haunts me,
> Of water receiving your death;
> Being changed; flowing on.

*

Many a death—especially when caused by an accident or sudden disease—is met by the bitter question, "Why?" Invariably it is addressed to God or against God, meaning "Why did You let that happen?" But there is another "Why?" in a suicide that must be addressed to the person who is now dead. I was too

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depressed to ask at the time, nor was I ready to ask myself whether I could have done something to prevent it. On July 4, the day before she killed herself, Pami had hiked over to my home to spend a few hours with me in the sun, talking about her future. Nothing in her tone or conversation had given me any inkling that she was teetering on the edge of the precipice. My immediate response to Pami's death was typical of how I coped at that period of my life with personal disasters: I drowned myself in work. Seventeen-hour workdays insured that when I finally dropped into bed I fell immediately asleep. In addition, there was the legal and accounting work involved in being the executor of Pami's estate, which, like Dale's, had multiplied manyfold with the rise of Syntex stock. But after eleven weeks of such work-induced anesthesia, I suddenly decided to travel, and I invited Diane Middlebrook to join me. In all my trips to Italy, I'd deliberately avoided visiting Venice and Florence: I felt that these two jewels should not be visited as part of a tourist itinerary in which sites are strung together and no individual component means much. Especially in Florence, I wanted to focus on the art and do it with the right companion.

Three evenings in a row, Diane and I sat in an outdoor cafe on the Piazza della Signoria facing the Palazzo Vecchio, to relive the day's impressions—and to talk about Pami's decision. Was it an inevitable consequence of a person suffering from depression who had been unwilling to consider therapy? Was it the chronic physical pain which prevented her during the past two years of her life from doing any of the garden and animal work she loved? She could barely feed the horses that had meant so much to her, let alone ride them. Was it her disillusionment with the commercial art scene, with the humiliating compromises a young artist is called upon to make? Or was it the lack of professional peers resulting from her self-imposed isolation in the majestic but also overpowering setting of SMIP? Her husband was surrounded every day by a multitude of people in the hospital, hardly a minute free for contemplation. Like me, he felt calmed upon returning in the evening to the solitude of the coastal mountains, often shrouded in the veil of the ocean fog pouring in through the canyons. The extraordinary silence, the absence of man-made sounds except for the occasional start of the refrigerator motor, was a soothing contrast to the

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cacophony of the workplace. But what about the person who remained behind all day? Does beauty in nature, when experienced in solitude, always calm and please, or does it also terrify? Some of Pami's bitterest poetry (published posthumously by her mother) was written during that period of her life.

Pami always read, and during those last few years she read a great deal. Much of it was women's writings and feminist literature, which provided fertile background to her ideas about the place of women in art. All her artistic role-models, all her former teachers at the San Francisco Art Institute and at Stanford University, had been men. Indeed until the time of her death, Stanford's art department had not a single woman faculty member among its studio art faculty. Diane, who was then head of Stanford's Center for Research on Women (CROW) in addition to her professorship in English, taught me a great deal about the daily affronts that women sense in a male-oriented culture. I am sure that my own quasi-patriarchal style contributed to Pami's sensitivity. These, and many other issues, were the subjects of our evening talks in the Piazza della Signoria, practically at the feet of the prancing bronze horse on which Cosimo de' Medici surveyed the splendor that his family had sponsored. "It's hard to think what Florence would've been like without the Medicis," I mused, pointing to the Giambologna bronze. "But imagine what it would be today if their patronage had extended to women," said Diane.

In that hour my own response to Pami's suicide finally took shape. Suicide is a message to the survivors, but the text must be read by each individual—parent, sibling, spouse, friend—in the light of that person's past relationship with the deceased. An answer to the question "Why?" can only be provided by the survivor; on that September evening in Florence, I decided that my answer, or at least my response, would be patronage of the type that would have benefitted Pami. Diane became my partner—intellectual and operational—in this endeavor. Under the aegis of a non-profit entity, the Djerassi Foundation, we decided to offer to Stanford's art department and its Center for Research on Women the use of Pamela's house and studio, as well as an annual stipend to underwrite one-year residencies at SMIP for women artists of accomplishment. The incumbent would have no formal teaching duties, but should be prepared

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for some open-studio events and for interaction with art students and faculty. Toward the end of her stay, an exhibition of the past year's work would be presented at the Art Museum of Stanford University. We felt that this would accomplish at least two objectives dear to Pamela's heart: exposure of mature women artists to the Stanford art community, and patronage through a public exhibition in a museum, free from commercial considerations. But after four years in that mode of operation, we saw that, although the driving distance from Pami's studio to Stanford University was only a few miles, the attitudinal gulf was simply too wide. The women artists accomplished a lot under close to ideal physical conditions, yet their presence had only a minimal effect on the Stanford art scene. We found no way of overcoming the sense of isolation and lack of peer interaction (also Pami's problem) encountered by the artists who had come alone for an entire year. I began to realize that free creative time without stipulation may be the ultimate gift for an artist, but it is an incomplete gift if it denies the crucial human need: companionship.

Diane, in her capacity as a Foundation trustee, visited the two oldest artist's colonies in the East, Yaddo and McDowell, as well as two smaller ones, the Edna St. Vincent Millay Colony and Hand Hollow—the latter founded by a friend of mine, the kinetic sculptor George Rickey, on his farm in East Chatham, New York. Diane's report and Rickey's counsel convinced me to convert the 4-bedroom former ranch manager's residence into an 8-bedroom 5-bath house, and to create some studios in the barn. By late 1982, The Djerassi Foundation artist's colony was born. The gender requirement was dropped as the community expanded, and to make our program available to a larger number of artists residencies were limited to periods of one to three months. Eight years later, with a cumulative total of over 500 artists in literature, music, visual arts, and choreography, our program has become the largest artist's colony west of the Mississippi. The artists have included a Nobel Prize laureate, a MacArthur Fellow, numerous Guggenheim fellowship holders and winners of literary and visual art awards, as well as many artists who had not yet received wide public recognition, but who were considered worthy of support by our selection panels. At one time or another, I have met most of the artists at din-

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ner—occasions that are usually followed by readings, slide presentations, music or dance performances, or just good conversation. As I listen to music just composed, or face a canvas, still moist on a studio wall; as I hear a poet read lines that could only have been born here; as I look with a sculptor for a site in the forest where once I searched for Pami's body; I catch myself wondering what she would have thought of all this.

Five years after Pami's death, I received another panicky phone call, from the artist who was then occupying her former home and studio, who also found a note, deep in back of one of the drawers. She was shaking when she handed me the piece of paper with my daughter's handwriting on it, a ghost's message. That night I recorded this in my journal:

> My only daughter
> I find this note:
>
> "I have nothing left to say,
> So I don't talk.
> I have nothing left to do,
> So I close up shop."
>
> No date
> No address
> No signature
> Your handwriting.
>
> Written for whom?
> Yourself?
> To whom it may concern?
>
> Written when?
> Days,
> Weeks,
> Perhaps months
> Before you walked into the woods?
>
> If only you'd said these words to me.

If only, I add in retrospect, your death had not been necessary before I took seriously the patronage of the living.

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C. S. GISCOMBE

Ontario Towns

1. September 1988

Up early in my room in the Kaladar Hotel & important to stop departure preparations for however long it took to note in my journal that "I feel the landscape making subtle demands on me." I'd broken down in a misty rain in Kaladar the day before—a flange had cracked on the hub of the bicycle's rear wheel, a thing not supposed to happen—and had had to thumb 60 miles to the nearest cycle shop and then 60 miles back with a new wheel arriving finally again in Kaladar in deep fog: it was by then 6 and I couldn't see where I was going anyway so I bought a room for $12 Canadian. I'd left the bike in one of the unused service bays at Neueport Services, a combination lunch counter/gas station/cheese shop run by an extended family from India: husband and wife, brothers-in-law, pregnant young women, teenage children. They'd been sweet to me, letting me leave my stuff there, saying that if I returned late and found that station closed I should knock on the door of their house up the road, walking me out into the mist so I could see it and know it for when I came back, pointing at it. Kaladar is a crossroads and little else: Neueport Services and the hotel across the street from it together are the business district. The patriarch of the family was a man a bit older than me, mid-forties, and he walked and walked around, he was always in motion: checking, worrying. He insisted on helping me put the bike back together upon my return (meaning it took twice as long as it should have) and politely inquired, after I'd got off his pay phone with my wife, if everything was OK at home, sounding nervously pleased when I said yes, relieved almost. For me? I'd come out of nowhere on a bicycle: I don't know what he thought was at stake.

I was heading, most immediately, for North Bay. My father, when he was growing up in Birmingham, had a cousin pen pal

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there up until World War II and so I wanted to *see* the very far-off place that the family had extended to when my grandfather's brother had gone from the family home in Buff Bay, Jamaica, B.W.I. to North Bay and lived there, God knows why, while my grandfather had landed in Birmingham, USA and schemed without success to get himself out to the West Coast. The family at Neueport Services then was like mine: people of color from near the equator here among the great outcroppings of rock, mosses, ripple-less still lakes choked with lily pads, coniferous trees looming through the pale, pale mist, all the *northern* things, all their "subtle demands." Across Route 41 the Kaladar Hotel was a ramshackle building, it smelled bad—musty and something worse than musty as well—and so seemed appropriately *of* the place. It had a harshly-lit little dining room on the first floor and I ordered a roast beef sandwich, tough and jagged little strips of meat on quartered white toast. Back upstairs I drew some water to take my nightly anti-asthma pill, gulped it and then spat as much as I could out—it was so awful, foetid tasting. "This is nowhere but I'm alive at the bone," I wrote, appropriating *alive at the bone* from Ondaatje's Billy the Kid book, "in this perfect little room," and then went to sleep for seven hours, leaving Kaladar at 8 A.M. in bright sunshine, waving to the people at Neueport, pleased to be back in the saddle.

At stake? Later that day my new odometer turned over onto 1000 miles which pleased me further because I couldn't remember what all the instructions-for-use had said and hadn't known if the little machine *would* flip over onto 1000.0 and not simply and suddenly read 000.0. Plus it was a fine day to be out banging across the Canadian Shield: the atypical early start, shining sun, good lunch—by the time 1000 miles was drawing nigh—at a hoity-toity Swiss restaurant I'd found in the crotch of an otherwise nondescript fork in the road, and the easy, continual thrill of traveling through at that moment the kind of country I like best: rolling hills to muscle over without dropping down more than one or two sprockets. Singing "John Henry," singing "Rally 'Round the Flag" (which is—if one can forget this moment's popular stupidity about how bad it is to burn one—actually quite moving, the lines in particular "All of us are poor, boys, / but none of us are slaves"), singing

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"Truckin'," "Erie Canal," and "Hesitation Blues," singing "Midnight Special" about going to North Bay and how, once there, you better walk right. It was long day 5 and it came in, at sunset, at 90.08 miles.

(At stake? I'd started in front of my house in Ithaca, NY, milepost 0, intending to bicycle via North Bay into the arctic watershed—where the rivers flow north into Hudson's Bay—and then get the train home. Out over and back across an interesting geographic border. I try to do a week or ten-day bike trip twice a year: the belly drops off, muscles thicken, the asthma vanishes and I return home with a clear head. When my daughter turns 14 in eleven years we'll start in Vancouver and bicycle to Alaska, though I'll be almost 50. Then what'll I do?)

I camped that night at Lake Dore, in a pay-place, and got the more typical late start the next day, cruising into Pembroke at 11:30: industrial, long, low shank of a town on the Ottawa River. I crossed Route 17, the next road I'd planned to follow, on the approach, the outskirts, and was dismayed to find its shoulders made of sand and the 2-lane itself choked with fast traffic. Sand's quite impossible to bike in (the wheels sink) and the degree of traffic suggested that even if I stayed at the most extreme edge of the pavement I'd still have a fair chance of getting smacked within the first hour. That far north in Ontario the number of roads declines dramatically: this one was the only way out of Pembroke in the direction I wanted to go. Bad news, too much to deal with so I drifted into Pembroke proper where suddenly it was noon: a lot of women who looked like secretaries were in the streets with bag lunches, walking up the hill from river-level downtown—going where?—still in their summer dresses (it was only September, so only the nights were cold), one very dark black man among them walking stiffly in a three-piece suit. West Indian? No, African, I thought as he didn't meet my eyes, looking through me instead, haughty. I realized there at high noon in Pembroke that I should have taken the other road, the one that cuts west through Algonquin Park, I'd passed it many miles previous: backtracking then, taking the extra day, was how it would have to be. But right then I was hungry and my every piece of clothing—except a pair of long khaki pants—reeked of sweat and road so I did a laundry and ate some lunch and while my clothes were in the

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dryer, on an impulse, I found a phone and called VIA and there was indeed a train to North Bay and it left Pembroke in 35 minutes. I was there though my socks were still damp and the conductor lifted the bike into the baggage car. I dropped down into a coach seat and the big extravagantly tattooed child sitting across the aisle tossed me a can of warm Budweiser from an apparently bottomless stash. Leaving Pembroke.

The train went out along the Ottawa and crossed Route 17 now and again, the sandy shoulder visibly continuing. Ugly little towns but the deciduous trees were just starting to go over to colors. What route would my grandfather's brother—whose name I didn't even know as I was sitting there in the coach trying to think about him, we're that kind of shutmouthed family—have taken to get to North Bay? This one, from Montréal or Ottawa or, more likely, the Ontario Northland Railway, the straight shot north from Toronto? I also didn't know why my grandfather had wanted to go from Birmingham out west—I can certainly imagine good reasons for any black person to want to leave the American South of the '20s, the '30s, the '40s, the '50s but I don't *know*, it was never discussed, and he's been dead now near thirty years. A certain impenetrability lies at the heart of things, the ball of (what?) family tendencies I can see in my father, the aloneness centralized, the deliberate silent space around the human part of it. I can see it in myself. The train lurched and squeaked past a beaver lake: ferns, marsh grasses, larches. The big child across the aisle was from Nova Scotia and was going out to work the forests up in northern B.C. "Fucking fourteen dollars an hour," he said, "and that's just to start, eh?" I saw a porcupine moving along beside us in that slow-motion way they have and then fell asleep in my seat. An hour later we came to North Bay.

Which I'd always heard described as a hole, a ragged frontier slum town, the heart of nowhere, or its *edge*. It *wasn't* lovely—too much traffic for the narrow streets and particularly devoid of trees—but it was no particular slum and the people I met were on the surface anyway more conscious, more alert (meaning alive) than people one tends to butt up against in towns in, say, upstate NY. Maybe the landscape demanded it of them. No Giscombes, though, in the phone book there in the station waiting room, not that I would have called. At stake? What

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would I have said? I didn't know where I could camp thereabouts and neither did the station agent so she directed me instead to the Ontario Provincial Police station, she and I joking companionably over her directions so much that I got lost in the process itself and found myself on a street full of blankfaced postwar houses. I hailed a girl who was walking by—about 12, the breasts bouncing free under her tunic having more to do with fat than with adolescence—asking her if she knew the way to the OPP and she stared at me then finally exhaled Holy shit! and called another girl slightly older who came running from a house and didn't know either but who called a third girl assuring me that she—the third girl, Joyce I think—knew where *everything* in town was. Joyce came bopping across the street in her high tops, one blue and one pink, and deck pants pulled tight over her skinny self. She was pale as the other two girls but her skin's definition was different, supple where theirs was rough and with a deep glow to it: that and her hair and especially the line of her jaw told me—though it didn't consciously (or *verbally*) register 'til hours later when I was describing her in my journal—that she had a few African ancestors. Her pals told her how I wanted to go to the OPP station and so she directed me, with elaborate gestures and succinct qualifications (first explaining to the others, e.g., that she would direct me though, in a stage whisper, "we do not know *why* he wishes to see the police nor shall we inquire") and gave me advice for cycling through North Bay. She was casually encyclopaedic about the layout of her town and her words and phrasings were measured: descriptions of the unimportant tossed off, *ways* of proceeding through certain intersections stressed. Fourteen and held in esteem by her friends, a leader of those white girls, the power of language singing within her, singing out from her. "Hey," she'd called after I'd thanked her and was drifting down toward the end of her street, "it was good meeting you," the salute to the social, to the incident itself, from a very mature child. More? I wondered the next day did she know she was black? And I wondered later still, 2 days and a hundred miles up the road it stopped me, at the chance of her being a relative.

In the morning I headed out of town stopping first at a sewing supply shop to buy a needle and thread to sew the button back onto one of my two pairs of shorts. The lady

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insisted on not charging me and gave me the official Tourism Ministry map of northern Ontario. "We'd not want you to think," she said, "that the only thing going on in Ontario is Toronto." She opened it up to help me find the road I'd be taking and there was the great colorless blankness of the map: vast, vast, vast Ontario with rivers running through it, symbols for OPP outposts and tiny airports, lakes, hardly any roads anywhere, more rivers, a huge profoundly, blankly white map—it covered the counter and draped over, North Bay at its bottom—of largely unbroken space.

And it was that space I made for, leaving North Bay that morning in weak sunlight that faded into hours of drizzle and more mist, heading further and further north, sharing the less traveled of the 2 roads north with, mostly, little convoys of lumber trucks, cruising for two days along the Ottawa, crossing into Quebec—at a strange lumber town with imported-from-Italy antique fountains at every intersection—and drifting up alongside the east shore of Lake Timiskaming, seeing Ontario (the lake's the border) through breaks in the fog and rain. The subtle demands of traveling in rain. To be moving through that—through bear, wolf, and moose country, though I saw none of those animals—was what I'd come for, to be alive and taking myself further north, further away from landscape I knew. I'd wanted to be moving and, at the same time, up close against the big space—rocks, exotic mosses, big skeins of wires coming down in cuts through the trees from remote hydro projects, animals, trees and more trees beyond those—stretching away from the edge of my body all the way to the coast of Labrador.

But early the next day it began raining again and I realized I wasn't going to make it into the watershed—I was missing my wife and my daughter and I was tired, I'd gotten 500 miles (not counting the little skip on the train) much of which was in rain and had had it—so I cut west, up over the top of the lake back into Ontario, and came to New Liskeard a bit before sunset. I'd picked up a schedule in North Bay so I knew there was a midnight train I could catch there down to Toronto. Coming into New Liskeard—which is a lovely town built on terraces up from Lake Timiskaming or up rather from an estuary of that lake—I was glad to pass a movie theater showing a film I'd not

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seen and figured I could stand seeing, *A Fish Called Wanda*, a Monty Python vehicle. I found the Ontario Northland station and left my panniers there, put on the pair of long khaki pants and came back to the theater for my night out on the town: it was strange to be suddenly sitting back in a movie eating popcorn and drinking a Coke alone among strangers laughing together with them at John Cleese and Jamie Lee Curtis. I'd not cared much for the Python "quest" movies but this was funny, or it seemed so in particular to me that night. And it was strange being entertained in public at an entertainment palace after nights of sleeping out (and one night in a gnomish hotel), strange to pay to be distracted, the distraction oddly more pleasant for my seeing it for what it was.

After the movie I had a surprisingly decent Chinese dinner then wandered back to the station. It was a cool night, cloudy as it had been all day, a breeze blowing in off Lake Timiskaming. 70 or 80 miles I guess short of the watershed. At stake? The arctic watershed is a ragged line on a few specialized maps, a fact of drainage; perhaps there would have been a sign. But it was—or would have been—an extremity, a new physical state to muscle *knowingly* into: body, mind, geography. (But here I was only as far as New Liskeard instead, having had a good dinner, having enjoyed myself at a film, having coincided with an artistic black child in surprising North Bay, having cycled 70, 80, and 90 miles a day for day after day, and now waiting for the southbound feeling OK. I was alive and, more, corporeal—feeling good and strong to be even this far north—and consciously deferring the big gratification. A long freight train came by—incredibly bright constellation of three headlights on the first engine, two of which were down low at either end of the base of the triangle, *the better to see you with*—picking up speed and the station master and I were standing there in the wind it made on the platform watching it, car after car after car until the shapes blurred: I don't know what was in his mind but I was thinking of living a long life of this.) At stake? Why was I always running to Canada when I had some time, crossing that border to touch the big otherness? Why does it feel so good to be alive with all thoughts of home intact so far from home itself?

I woke up once during the longish stop in North Bay and

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then slept all the way until we slowed for the Toronto 'burbs: Saabs and BMW's jammed into the commuter station parking lots, it being mid-morning so all the lawyers and bankers and what-have-you had already been at their desks a good two hours. And more or less suddenly the city itself was visible, one of the major ones of the Western world: publishing, theatre, commerce, immigrants from all over the world, a thousand posh things to do at night. But still, above the tracks where it would be visible to the commuters on their trains that also used this route in, was a huge billboard advertising hiking boots, good old-fashioned Vibram-soled waffle stompers to live in all day whilst tromping across the muskeg, through exotic mosses, along the marges of those still lakes, *that* sense of the world saluted at the marge of sophisticated Toronto. All that space behind me, I thought, that I'd gone off into and come back out of and I'd not even got to the place where the rivers flow north or the place beyond there where the roads stop (or the place beyond even that where the Ontario Northland tracks stop). This, I thought—though I recognized the presumption a few days later—, living *with* all that space, this was what it meant to be Canadian.

2. June 1989

I glided down the hill into Kaladar and there was Neueport Services, doing a brisk trade in the heat, cars lined up at the pumps for that Shell gasoline. This time it was only the end of my second day—I'd gotten a lift from Ithaca to near Watertown, NY—and it being only 6 and one of the longest days of the year I was thinking of going further, pressing on to the provincial park 12 miles up the road. But it was hot and I was tired and they remembered me when I went in to buy a bottle of apple juice. The man *I* remembered as being patriarch was absent and one of the younger guys—who perhaps had always really been in charge? the other having been only patriarch*al*?—took me around to show me how they'd expanded the business since I'd been there the previous September: the under-one-roof complex now included a package store and a novelty shop, the sort of place where one buys funny bumper

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stickers. I was pleased that they were doing well and said so as I felt my body beginning to acknowledge road-weariness, as the miles caught up with me as they say, as the Kaladar Hotel squatting—again—across Rte. 41 started to look good.

This was a different kind of trip, a bit more frantic, that much more directed. I'd broken one of my rules for bike traveling—*all trips* must *start at home*—and taken a lift for the first 150 miles with my friend David Warren to Lake Bonaparte, at the northwestern edge of the Adirondacks: this meant I could head straight west and actually be—via 2 ferries—in Canada, the big otherness, by the end of Day One. What was at stake: After living 20 years in upstate NY I'd had a pre-middle age surge of ambition and taken a faculty job at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois, in the Corn Belt, far from everywhere in the world I'd gotten familiar with. This was—as I explained to 2 cyclists from Toronto whom I met on the first of the two ferries to Kingston—my farewell tour of the East. *It was good of you*, said the woman as we cycled across Wolfe Island to the second ferry, *to take your farewell tour in Canada.* I camped with them that night in Kingston: her name was Jackie and she was tough and arrogant and smart and awkwardly sweet. I don't recall the man's name: there was tension between them, their end probably as lovers (or the awkward *beginnings* of their being lovers). At stake? I wanted to get back to North Bay and spend a day or so checking out the Giscombes there—what public history or notation I could find—and then get myself quickly back to Ithaca to re-commence packing for the move west. North Bay's a long, long way from central Illinois: this was just about the last chance to get up there, even this casually.

Leaving Kingston the next morning, Sunday, in hot hazy sunlight and pressing on north through Napanee and then up into the woods and lakes I got to Kaladar, the end of Day 2. I steeled myself and went on into the Kaladar Hotel, finding the lobby different: it didn't smell bad, the moldy stacks of magazines were gone and there was a large etching propped on one of the couches (which were new) of a black man playing a flute. No one around, though, except in the dining room which had also been refurbished. The waiter took me back through hallways and there, in a tiny office, was one of the new owners.

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The hotel itself, she said, wasn't ready yet, they were still fixing up the place having just bought it in April. But I persisted until she agreed to let me have my old room, with its spray-painted #1 on the door, just for the evening "since you stayed here before and know what the rooms are like"; she filled out a lodging card for me, taking care to cross out the name of the former proprietor, Beulah Tricky. In the dining room her husband, the cook, shook my hand and told me to sit anywhere. She was white, he was black, both somewhere past 50 and from a town nearby. Their names—Donna and Andy Anderson—were listed on the hotel's ad on the Chamber of Commerce paper placemat in among the car dealerships and fishing camps, "Open Under New Management." I ordered a bottle of Labatt's and the day's special, liver & onions, using the beer glass to prop open my copy of Eugene Genovese's book about the slaves, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: I'd be teaching a course in African-American Lit in a few weeks and I wanted to know as much as I could about context. A fellow at the next table inquired as to what I was reading and we began talking about *recent* history, about Salman Rushdie's troubles and what few options the British had in dealing with matters of his protection. Soon we were talking about nations and the nature of power, politics, things that related rather much to Brother Genovese's themes in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. It was a conversation I'd not expected to be having in the Kaladar Hotel. He was, it turned out, a white (or apparently white) Trinidadian, a bit older than me, who'd just given up on finishing *The Satanic Verses*, having found it tiresome. A young man sitting nearby commenced about how the Rushdie thing was nothing but another insult to the West by the A-rabs and that the Brits just ought to nuke Iran but the man from Trinidad and I agreed in gestures and in a couple of words exchanged over the younger man's head that the world *is* what it is.

The dinner Andy Anderson brought me that evening was one of the best dinners I've ever had and I didn't even know I was very hungry. Simple food exquisitely prepared: the liver was more tender than I'd imagined it ever would be, more delicately breaded, more beautifully garnished with asparagus and cauliflower and broccoli. Afterwards there was pie and easy talk with him and Donna. They bought up dilapidated places

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like the Kaladar Hotel had been for years and would run them until the places got successful, and they—Donna and Andy—were bored, at which point they'd move on down the road. They were both older than they looked. Looking at him, listening to him talk in that Canadian lilt (with no recognizable black inflection), I thought naturally of my grandfather's brother but had no project agenda at the moment and didn't think to ask him the questions that have occurred to me since meeting him and since being in North Bay again. I mentioned my great-uncle and how I was going to North Bay to look for family things, seeing if he'd have anything to say about that, but didn't press the point when he didn't. Now of course I see it as being a constellation of points: I mean my ignorance of black life in the Ontario bush and frontier towns, my ignorance of the context within the context. I didn't—and still don't—know what's at stake in the bigger pictures: I'd been thinking of my great-uncle's blackness making him anomalous in North Bay, but that's the way my family has always thought of itself: *whatever* the context, we are separate from it. I'd had my hiking boot epiphany on the train the year before about Canadian identity, but that was myself being knee-jerk literary, meaning presumptuous as well as detached from anything specific. I'd not been prepared to meet a native black man in upper Canada who served me an incredible dinner while wearing penny loafers. And besides, in my house at home I'm the cook, for company and the weekdays both, and have been for years—I'm intimate with that whole production including some of the metaphors. Otherness? How are we different, exactly, and how are we similar (exactly)?

Halfway through the next day I made the turn I should have made the year before and pressed on northwest over the hill roads. One stretch of ten miles was all uphill and under construction: a loose gravel road surface then over which thundered dump trucks (meaning layers and layers of dust in the air). The lads had all the other big yellow machines at play as well (more dust) while bored flag-girls sat on coolers smoking cigarettes, 90° or so: it took an hour and a half to get that 10 miles but then I came to the hamlet of Palmer Rapids on the Madawaska River and turned there onto a beautifully paved wide-shouldered road that went alongside the river for 10

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more, straight and flat, the river hidden beyond a thick line of trees but its coolness touching the road. I camped that night at Carson Lake Provincial Park eating cold beans for dinner and then dozing off still dressed. Waking at midnight I stripped and swam out into Carson Lake itself until I got a chill and the fact of swimming alone at night in a strange lake suddenly struck me as being a bad idea. I'd come that day 85 miles.

Two days later I arrived in North Bay, again by train. I'd intended to cycle all the way and had taken measures to ensure that, but a terrible and persistent headwind—on the day I left Carson Lake—had held me to 7 and 8 mph all the way through big Algonquin Park and that skewed my schedule just enough to matter so I spent the last 50 miles of the trip set up in the dining car drinking coffee and watching the landscape slip by. Certainly this was the way my father's uncle had got to North Bay, and this train ride I knew his name—Charles Giscome. I'd got my father talking on the phone about him and my grandfather a few days before I'd left. They "fell out over something," he said, "or, more likely, a lot of somethings" early in the century and then Charles had dropped the *b* from his name on account of whatever the fights were about. This story I'd heard before, when I was in high school, but my memory from then was that my grandfather's brother had dropped the *e* from the name, making it *Giscomb*. This is folk culture, storytelling. This is the naming act mutating, specificity shifting up and shifting down, the oral tradition.

I set up camp where I'd camped before in North Bay and the next morning went out to the regional museum at the edge of town. It was cramped and ugly but not a bad place at all and the intense young man in charge found a J. Giscombe—spelled like that—on the list of local men who'd come back alive out of WW II. Johnny, whose name I'd heard before, my father's old pen pal: the obvious—that they'd stopped writing because of Johnny going off to the war—hadn't occurred to me and I was relieved to discover that he'd not been killed there, that I wasn't present at the site of some 50-year-old tragedy. By the time I quit the museum and was cruising back downtown it was noon, and the construction crews were breaking for lunch: lots of building was going on, a new subdivision to fight the woods back some—a couple of the fellows were black, we nodded to

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each other in the sunshine. (Two years before, when I was cycling through Wales, I met another black man walking towards me on the road out of Penrhyndeudraeth. We both slowed, making eye contact, realizing that some sort of exchange, some sort of salute, was called for, Wales being what it is. But all either of us could think to do was discuss the distance from the point where we *did* stop to speak to one another and the town I'd recently passed through: he asked how far it was, I told him. We wished each other well then and continued on our ways. He had a strange accent, a soft and lovely voice, neither West Indian nor one of the sets of intonations I recognize as African.)

I took my lunch at a crowded greasy spoon back downtown on the main drag, sitting at the counter near the window so I could watch the city parade by: not *many* black people, but more of us than I'd figured from my first trip there. After lunch and coffee I settled down in the library with the big stack of city directories. The earliest one was 1914 and there he was with his name spelled G-I-S-C-O-M-E, Charles Giscome was a chef then, living on Front Street in what seemed to be a largely Italian neighborhood, immigrants like him. Later there was a wife, Lucille, and later still there were children. I made pages and pages of notes on the family's progress, jobs, addresses, then lost the notebook when we moved to Illinois. Typical. But I remember that Charles Giscome's kids took jobs, moved away from home, apparently lost the jobs and moved back. One—Sybil, I think—eventually became a teacher, another ran a realty company. The old man himself, in the '30s, was listed for a while as a "labourer" and then for a year had a tourist camp. And then in 1940 both he and John had been porters, the *classic* middle-class job for US black men for so many years, porters on the Timiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway. But the next year they were all gone, all of them: I stared at the book at the place between the 2 other names, Giscard I think and Givens; and they were gone for the year after that as well and then there were no more directories until the '50s and they weren't in any of those either. Suddenly then I was back in the library basement and it was past 3 o'clock, too late really to start checking out anywhere else—city hall, the schools, etc. (When I came across the porter job I'd called the railroad archive and

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got nowhere.) I felt tired and hot, as though I'd walked across town several times, and began to think about how I'd spend the rest of the day, the suddenly immense blank time before the 3 A.M. train south.

I fumbled through the library some reading bits in *Certain People*, white Stephen Birmingham's book about the US black middle class and, from the same shelf, some social science essays on the black Canadian community, an entity "prone to fragmentation," or something like that. Leaving the library I cycled around until I found Front Street but the numbers were all wrong. Still, I realized that I was in the same neighborhood I'd been in the year before where the black girl had talked so beautifully to me: it made, of course, *sociological* sense but it pleased me as well on the other levels. But the fragmentation was setting in, the feeling of breathlessness, of a profound and generalized *fade*, meaning severance, meaning the coming invisibility: no name in the street in this town or in Ithaca. I must have looked lost: a teenager wearing a Simple Minds T-shirt asked if he could help me find something. I gave him a number, an address, on Front Street beyond the point where the street T'd into another, asking if Front re-commenced somewhere later on, across the RR tracks, say. No, he said, this is it, man, and asked the name of the people I was looking for. I told him, warning that it had been a long time since they'd lived there, let him shake his head *no*. It felt something like good, though, pronouncing the name aloud and correctly into the North Bay streets, into the woods and lakes past the gates to the city. In a spate of the directories from the mid-'30s, the name was spelled, oddly, *with* the b, and I imagined as I sat in the basement of the North Bay library that during those years my great-uncle had been aiming at a reconciliation with my grandfather, the name spelling being *emblematic* of that; but it's such a weird name anyway that you never know how someone's going to pronounce it after seeing it written or, more to the point, write it after hearing it said—maybe whoever put the city book together "corrected" the spelling, based on hearing the name or based on -combe being a common British name suffix. West Indians recognize *Giscombe*, though, as West Indian, I don't know how.

As we'd approached the lights of Kingston on the ferry my 2

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companions and I had been talking to some hip people from Toronto. When they found out I was heading for North Bay they were politely incredulous at the distance I had yet before me and politely baffled at my choice of destination: with their faces they reaffirmed the commonly held attitude toward the place (the edge of nowhere, the northernmost slum), enough so that I could joke with them some—in that mocking way hip people have—about North Bay being the garden spot of the golden north, etc., and then turn a mysterious half-smile on 'em as I turned to gaze Kingston-ward. *I had to leave a little girl,* Belafonte sang, *in Kingston-town.* Other places, even further, loom: when my daughter Madeline and I bike from Vancouver to Alaska we'll go through Giscome, British Columbia, named for the nineteenth-century black miner John Robert Giscome. I've been asserting casually for years, mostly in conversation, that his name is an "arguable phonetic spelling" of my own, forging a tie that way between myself and John Robert, between myself and *out there.* And now my thinking is that maybe it could be something beyond the phonetic, a blood connection, a real family *thing* in the insistence on particular spellings (and whatever loyalties that might imply) at the heart or *alongside* however the long heart of a family is figured or construed. The Canadian spelling. I mean I was surprised to find that my grandfather's brother had spelled his name as John Robert had—or as John Robert's was written down. (A Pacific Great Eastern Railroad map I saw once places the "Giscome Portage"; the old Grand Trunk Western map I own places the "Giscombe Portage.") I don't care much for mysteries, they make me irritable. But I do have a thing for the north. This has been the family's progress of course, the movement from south up this way; indeed, it's an African-American archetype—culture occurs in landscape—and here I am, the first generation born admittedly bourgeois across the Ohio River, still having the impulse, *north!*, though it's metaphorized into something other than the sane set of reasons-for-migration that belonged to those who went earlier. But the part of North Bay where I was looking for my great-uncle's addresses does look strikingly like the west end of Bloomington, my current city, the side of town where the poorer people live, the side split and split again by those railroad tracks. The difference of

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course is that North Bay *is* Canadian so there's no one big empty street, as there is here as there is in every other US city, no one big empty street named for Dr. King.

The station agent in North Bay remembered me from my having been there before but I embarrassed and surprised myself by failing to recognize *her* when I trailed into the depot that night: I'd thought *about* her, recalling that I'd liked her and had wondered, hopefully, whether or not she'd still be there working for them, this last as I sat through the new and dull Batman movie at a theater downtown, killing time, 2 of the many hours before the train. But if she was offended she didn't show it and why should she be? It's not as though we'd been lovers or even friends. But she is, I realized at some point, the person I know best in that town which is the furthest known edge of this my ragged family.

Three o'clock came and the depot was filled with people waiting for both the Southbound and the Northbound, which were due to pass each other at North Bay. Four o'clock came and still neither train had showed. Many of us were out on the platform by then watching for them and telling stories. The station agent came out and joined us after a while: we had all seen the headlight appear but the train itself had stopped half a mile or so down the track so we got the light mixed up with other lights down there, street lights, God knows what else. Soon the sky itself began to lighten and only then, slowly, did the train ease in. The agent went inside and came out again, with a sleepy crowd behind her, saying *This is the Northbound.* I looked up and saw the red-light marked tail end of another train backing silently in behind on the same track, a conductor with a walkie-talkie riding the vestibule. When it stopped, ten feet from the Northbound, I got on the coach looking over my shoulder at the woman working both trains with the baggage cart, wondering how long she'd remember me from this time.

But then the train started with a soft jerk forward. "Now *he's* gonna have to back out," the conductor said to another passenger, pointing back at the Northbound. The sun was almost in the sky, my last long night in Canada spent where else but in a train station. One needs songs to sing on the road, of the

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road—music should have come up, some sort of as yet unimagined straining *northern* jazz, an *insistent* strain, say, of straying muted horns, fragmented, breaking. Leaving North Bay.

3. November 1989

Midterm exam in my African American Lit course, English 165-01, Illinois State University, Fall 1989. I'd assigned 3 take-home essay questions about the books I'd had the students read and, for many, these were the first three essays they'd been called upon to write since they'd left the university's one required Freshman English course. I hadn't known, at the time, that this was the case. But all that's to say that lots of distraught kids called the night before the morning the exam was due telling me that they had no idea what the questions were about and could I please tell them "what you want." They were being thrown, in part, by my using terms like "discuss" and "evaluate," which they'd, apparently, not encountered much before.

Most of my students in that course were black like me but, for the greatest part, from Chicago, a city I don't know, and from lives I don't know—I was their age 20 years ago and in college in upstate New York living, more or less by default, with white people and described accurately by those people as a loner: walking all over town by myself, reading books, trying to write. "We're not a reading people," suggested another new black professor here, though he is and I am. And I think that his comment, made over lunch in the quiet, spacious week after our first year at Illinois State had ended, made us both uncomfortable or, more to the point, brought home to us the strain between ourselves and our students. (Of course, my white I.S.U. students don't, as a group, read much of anything either, but that's not the point or it's a different point.) That night, though, there I was on the phone with the kids—one on one—after speaking so much from my spot in the rough circle I'd had them pull the desks into 3 mornings a week and from which I'd suggested Genovese's Marxism to them and tried to get them to speak about Frederick Douglass or Zora Neale Hurston, about Langston Hughes. I'd suggested to them the presumption I saw in white authors like William Styron and

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Eudora Welty when those authors dealt in fiction with black characters. But only rarely would one of them come to see me during office hours (though my white creative writing students often came). They were, as a class, very different from the classes of black students I'd had in the years I'd taught part-time at Cornell: a percentage (small but visible) of those students were the children of West Indians who'd gone to New York City instead of Toronto or London or, God knows, North Bay. Immigrants' kids. But on the phone that night with the kids from Chicago I began to realize how much of what I'd been asking of them—meaning *expecting* of them—they hadn't understood in spite of all the years I'd spent teaching and studying and talking about the act of language, the years spent achieving some success with my own written work. "But all value is assigned, / is brought in," I said in a poem. Once, when I was in Britain for a few weeks with my wife, I'd cycled (while she was at a conference) from London up to Edinburgh and when we got back to the States a black friend had suggested that I was "probably the first black person ever to do that," seeing metaphoric implications, I think, regarding England's colonial power, not to mention it being the place where our language—he's also an English professor—came partly from. Assigned value. So I came to realize, during my evening of talk on the telephone, that other things were at stake for my students now, their expectations were other than mine or even what mine had been. But *how* are we different, exactly?

One woman was close, I think, to tears over the question concerning the character development of Janie Crawford in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I asked her about other novels she'd read, thinking that if we had some book in common I might be able to get her considering the function of character in *Their Eyes* by talking at some length with her about the characters—how minor ones complement major ones—in that book from long ago. But she hadn't read a novel since sophomore year in high school and couldn't remember what it was she'd read then. I figured I'd better try a different angle.

"How 'bout movies?" I said. Films, books, what the hell's the difference between made things? "You like movies? What movies have you been to recently?"

She paused, then laughed ambiguously and said, "*Batman*."

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And there I was again, out of my kitchen in Bloomington, Illinois, a million miles away from my office at Illinois State, from meetings of the faculty and of the handful of interested students who make up the Black Writers' Forum, off the lone prairie and back in a sweaty line outside a theater in Canada and then inside with the loud crowd, slack-faced and noisy—every fool in North Bay had been there. And I'd *liked* North Bay, I'd felt comfortable and curious both in that raggedy-ass narrow-street town at the edge of deep and romantic space where that beautiful black child had spoken so brilliantly to me (she must have known she was black I think as I reconstruct her now in Illinois, in memory: her gestures had that *thing*, or edges of it anyway—maybe she her-supple-self and her language of easy reference, point casually broken/fragmented into inventive variations, vocal dances for a stranger, the *semblance*—the half rime—of relation, maybe this was the northern jazz I'd longed for when I was leaving North Bay). But there in the movie theater that night had been nothing but 42 million dollars of US junk culture shrunk into a 2-hour format, seven or eight hundred white Canadians who were lapping it up, and myself the only black person I saw in the house. Of course even sweet and smart Jackie, the lady with whom I'd sailed into Kingston, had warned me, as we'd loitered at the ferry-slip, that I'd be "in the minority in Ontario," waiting a beat to smile broadly and explain that I'd be in said predicament because I wasn't wearing a Batman T-shirt. Change the joke please, I'd thought, try for a different double-entendre, save yourself. *Bat*man. Poor Billy Dee Williams had had to walk around looking baffled through the whole flick, jive-ass in Gotham and this the final evening of my farewell tour of the East. Is this my life? I'd thought unhappily in the theater, my characteristic thought when I realize I'm wasting time, just killing time as though time wasn't committing suicide on its own fast enough. But the landscape changes and the changes make their demands, revise the experience.

"OK," I said, "we had, say 4 characters: there was Batman himself, Jack Nicholson as the Joker, Kim Basinger as the love interest and, say, Police Commissioner Gordon."

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DAVID MASON

Spooning

After my grandfather died I went back
to help my mother sell his furniture:
the old chair he did his sitting on,
the kitchen things. Going through his boxes
I found letters, cancelled checks, the usual
old photographs of relatives I hardly knew
and my grandmother, clutching an apron in her hands.
And *her*. There was an old publicity still
taken when she wore her hair like a helmet,
polished black. Posed before a cardboard shell
and painted waves, she seemed unattainable,
as she was meant to.

For years we thought he lied
about his knowing her when he was young,
but grandfather was a man who hated liars,
a man who worshipped all the tarnished virtues,
went daily to his shop at eight, until
the first of three strokes forced him to retire.

He liked talking. Somebody had to listen,
so I was the listener for hours after school
until my parents called me home for dinner.
We'd sit on his glassed-in porch where he kept a box
of apples wrapped in newsprint.
He told me about the time he lost a job
at the mill. Nooksack seemed to kill its young
with boredom even then, but he owned a car,
a '24 Ford. He drove it east to see
America, got as far as Spokane's desert,
sold the car and worked back on the railroad.

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Sometimes he asked me what I liked to do.
I told him about the drive-in movies where
my brother, Billy, took me if I paid.
In small towns everyone goes to the movies.
Not grandfather. He said they made them better when
nobody talked, and faces told it all.
"I knew Lydia Truman Gates," he said,
"back when she was plain old Lydia Carter
down on Water Street. One time her old man
caught us spooning out to the railroad tracks.
Nearly tanned my hide. He was a fisherman—
that is, till she moved her folks to Hollywood."

I don't know why, but I simply couldn't ask
what spooning was. He seemed to talk then
more to his chair's abrasions on the floor,
more to the pale alders outside his window.
The way he said her name I couldn't ask
who was Lydia Truman Gates.

*

"Nonsense,"
was all my mother said at dinner. "His mind
went haywire in the hospital. He's old.
He makes things up and can't tell the difference."

I think my father's smile embarrassed her
when he said, "The poor guy's disappointed.
Nothing went right for him, so he daydreams."

"Nonsense," my mother said. "And anyway
no Lydia Truman Gates ever came
from a town like this."

"It's not so bad a place.
I make a pretty decent living here."

My mother huffed. While I stared past my plate
Billy asked, "Who is Lydia Truman Gates?"

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*

It wasn't long before we all found out.
The papers ran a story on her. How
she was famous in the twenties for a while,
married the oil billionaire, Gates, and retired.
She was coming back home to Nooksack. The mayor
would give a big award and ask her help
to renovate our landmark theatre.

Our mother said we had better things to spend
our money on than some old movie house,
though she remembered how it used to look.
She said that people living in the past
wouldn't amount to much.
Billy and I pretended we didn't care.
We didn't tell our parents where we went
that night, riding our bikes in a warm wind
past the fishhouses on the Puget Sound,
and up Grant Street to the Hiawatha.

Inside, Billy held my hand, and showed me
faded paintings of Indians on the walls
and dark forest patterns in the worn carpet.
The place smelled stale like old decaying clothes
shut up in a trunk for twenty years,
but Nooksack's best were there, some in tuxes,
and women stuffed into their evening gowns.
We sat in the balcony looking down
on bald heads, high hair-dos and jewels.
Near the stage they had a twenty-piece band—
I still remember when the lights went out
the violins rose like a flock of birds
all at once. The drums sounded a shudder.

We saw *Morocco Gold*, *The Outlaw*, *Colonel Clay*
and the comic short, *A Bird in the Hand*,
flickering down to the screen
where Lydia Truman Gates arose in veils,
in something gossamer

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astonishing even in 1965.
Lydia Truman Gates was like a dream
of lithe attention, her dark eyes laughing
at death, at poverty or a satin bed.
And when they brought her on the stage, applause
rising and falling like a tidal wave,
I had to stand up on my seat to see
a frail old woman assisted by two men,
tiny on that distant stage.

My brother
yanked me past what seemed like a hundred pairs
of knees for all the times I said, "Excuse us."
We ran out where the chauffeur
waited by her limousine, his face painted
green by the light from Heilman's Piano Store,
breathing smoke. "You guys keep your distance."

"Is she coming out?"

He crushed his cigarette:
"No, she's gonna die in there. What do you think?"

More people joined us, pacing in the alley,
watching the chauffeur smoke by the door propped
open with a cinderblock.
And then the door half-opened, sighed back,
opened at last on the forearm of a man.

Behind him, Lydia Truman Gates stepped out
with her cane—hardly the woman I had seen
enduring all the problems of the world
with such aplomb. She stared down at the pavement,
saying, "Thank you, I can see it clearly now."

"Mrs. Gates," Billy stuttered. "Mrs. Gates."

The chauffeur tried to block us, but she said,
"That's all right, Andrew. They're just kids. I'm
safe."

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"Our grandpa says hello," I blurted out.

She paused for half a beat, glanced at Billy,
then peered at me as if to study terror,
smiling. "Well I'll be damed. And who's he?"

"Don't listen to him," Billy said. "He's nuts."

"George McCracken," I said, "the one you spooned with
down by the railroad tracks."

"George McCracken."
She straightened, looked up at the strip of sky.
"Spooned. Well, that's one way to talk about it."
She laughed from deep down in her husky lungs.
"Old Georgie McCracken. Is he still alive?
Too scared to come downtown and say hello?"
She reached out from her furs and touched my hair.
"Thanks for the message, little man. I knew him.
I knew he'd never get out of this town.
You tell your grampa Hi from Liddy Carter."

The man at her elbow said they had to leave.
She nodded, handing her award and purse
to the chauffeur.

Then flashbulbs started popping.
I saw her face lit up, then pale and caving
back into the darkness. "Christ," she whispered,
"get me out of here."

I stumbled, or was pushed.
My eyes kept seeing her exploding at me,
a woman made entirely of light
beside the smaller figure who was real.
Two men tipped her into the limousine
and it slid off like a shark, parting the crowd.

*

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A picture ran in the next day's *Herald*—
the great actress touches a local boy.
For two weeks everybody talked about me,
but I kept thinking, "Is he still alive?
Too scared to come downtown and say hello?"

I thought of her decaying on a screen,
her ribs folding like a silk umbrella's rods,
while all the men who gathered around her
clutched at the remnants of her empty dress.

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ROBERT OLEN BUTLER

Mr. Green

I am a Catholic, the daughter of a Catholic mother and father, and I do not believe in the worship of my ancestors, especially in the form of a parrot. My father's parents died when he was very young and he became a Catholic in an orphanage run by nuns in Hanoi. My mother's mother was a Catholic but her father was not and, like many Vietnamese, he was a believer in what Confucius taught about ancestors. I remember him taking me by the hand while my parents and my grandmother were sitting under a banana tree in the yard and he said, "Let's go talk with Mr. Green." He led me into the house and he touched his lips with his forefinger to tell me that this was a secret. Mr. Green was my grandfather's parrot and I loved talking with him, but we passed Mr. Green's roost in the front room. Mr. Green said, "Hello, kind sir," but we didn't even answer him.

My grandfather took me to the back of his house, to a room that my mother had said was private, that she had yanked me away from when I once had tried to look. It had a bead curtain at the door and we passed through it and the beads rustled like tall grass. The room was dim, lit by candles, and it smelled of incense, and my grandfather stood me before a little shrine with flowers and a smoking incense bowl and two brass candlesticks and between them a photo of a man in a Chinese mandarin hat. "That's my father," he said nodding toward the photo. "He lives here." Then he let go of my hand and touched my shoulder. "Say a prayer for my father." The face in the photo was tilted a little to the side and was smiling faintly, like he'd just asked me a question and he was waiting for an answer that he expected to like. I knelt before the shrine as I did at mass and I said the only prayer I knew by heart, the Lord's Prayer.

But as I prayed, I was conscious of my grandfather. I even peeked at him as he stepped to the door and parted the beads

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and looked toward the front of the house. Then he returned and stood beside me and I finished my prayer and I listened to the beads rustling into silence behind us. When I said "Amen" aloud, my grandfather knelt beside me and leaned near and whispered, "Your father is doing a terrible thing. If he must be a Catholic, that's one thing. But he has left the spirits of his ancestors to wander for eternity in loneliness." It was hard for me to believe that my father was doing something as terrible as this, but it was harder for me to believe that my grandfather, who was even older than my father, could be wrong.

My grandfather explained about the spirit world, how the souls of our ancestors continue to need love and attention and devotion. Given these things, they will share in our lives and they will bless us and even warn us about disasters in our dreams. But if we neglect the souls of our ancestors, they will become lost and lonely and will wander around in the kingdom of the dead no better off than a warrior killed by his enemy and left unburied in a rice paddy to be eaten by black birds of prey.

When my grandfather told me about the birds plucking out the eyes of the dead and about the possibility of our own ancestors, our own family, suffering just like that if we ignore them, I said, "Don't worry, Grandfather, I will always say prayers for you and make offerings for you, even if I'm a Catholic."

I thought this would please my grandfather, but he just shook his head sharply, like he was mad at me, and he said, "Not possible."

"I can," I said.

Then he looked at me and I guess he realized that he'd spoken harshly. He tilted his head slightly and smiled a little smile—just like his father in the picture—but what he said wasn't something to smile about. "You are a girl," he said. "So it's not possible for you to do it alone. Only a son can oversee the worship of his ancestors."

I felt a strange thing inside me, a recoiling, like I'd stepped barefoot on a slug, but how can you recoil from your own body? And so I began to cry. My grandfather patted me and kissed me and said it was all right, but it wasn't all right for me. I wanted to protect my grandfather's soul, but it wasn't in my power. I was a girl. We waited together before the shrine and when I'd

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stopped crying, we went back to the front room and my grandfather bowed to his parrot and said, "Hello, kind sir," and Mr. Green said, "Hello, kind sir," and even though I loved the parrot, I would not speak to him that day because he was a boy and I wasn't.

This was in our town which was on the bank of the Red River just south of Hanoi. We left that town not long after. I was seven years old and I remember hearing my grandfather arguing with my parents. I was sleeping on a mat at the back of our house and I woke up and I heard voices and my grandfather said, "Not possible." The words chilled me but then I listened more closely and I knew they were discussing the trip we were about to go on. Everyone was very frightened and excited. There were many families in our little town who were planning to leave. They had even taken the bell out of the church tower to carry with them. We were all Catholics. But grandfather did not have the concerns of the Catholics. He was concerned about the spirits of his ancestors. This was the place where they were born and died and were buried. He was afraid that they would not make the trip. "What then?" he cried. And later he spoke of the people of the south and how they would hate us, being from the north. "What then?" he said.

Mr. Green says that too. "What then?" he has cried to me a thousand times, ten thousand times, in the past sixteen years. Parrots can live for a hundred years. And though I could not protect my dead grandfather's soul, I could take care of his parrot. When my grandfather died in Saigon in 1972, he made sure that Mr. Green came to me. I was twenty-four then and newly married and I still loved Mr. Green. He would sit on my shoulder and take the top of my ear in his beak, a beak that could crush the hardest shell, and he would hold my ear with the greatest gentleness and touch me with his tongue.

I have brought Mr. Green with me to the United States of America and in the long summers here in New Orleans and in the warm springs and falls and even in many days of our mild winters, he sits on my screened-in back porch, near the door, and he speaks in the voice of my grandfather. When he wants to get onto my shoulder and go with me into the community garden he says, "What then?" And when I first come to him in the morning, he says, "Hello, kind sir."

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He loves me. That is, I am the only person who can go near him without his attempting to draw blood. But he loved my grandfather before me, and there are times when he seems to hold the spirit of my grandfather and all his knowledge. Mr. Green sits on my shoulder and presses close to my head and he repeats the words that he has heard from my husband and my children. My children even teach him English words. He says all these things, but without any feeling. The Vietnamese words of my grandfather, however, come out powerfully, like someone very strong is inside him. And whenever he speaks with my grandfather's voice, Mr. Green's eyes dilate and contract over and over, which is a parrot's display of happiness. Yesterday I tried to give him some drops that the veterinarian prescribed for him and Mr. Green said, "Not possible," and even though he is sick, his eyes showed how pleased he was to defy me.

When we all lived in Saigon at last, my grandfather discovered the bird market on Ham Nghi Street and he would take me there. Actually, in the street market of Ham Nghi there were animals of all kinds—dogs and monkeys and rabbits and turtles and even wildcats. But when my grandfather took my hand and said to me, "Come, little one," and we walked down Tran Hung Dao, where our house was, and we came to Ham Nghi, he always took me to the place with the birds.

The canaries were the most loved by everyone who came to the market and my grandfather sang with them. They all hopped to the side of their cages that was closest to my grandfather and he whistled and hummed and even sang words, songs from the north that he sang quite low, so that only the birds could hear. He did not want the people of Saigon to realize he was from the north. And the canaries all opened their mouths and the air filled with their sounds, their throats ruffling and puffing, and I looked at my grandfather's throat to see if it moved the way the throats of these birds moved. It did not move at all. His skin was slack there, and in all the times I saw him charm the birds, I never saw his throat move, like he didn't really mean the sounds he made. The people all laughed when they saw what he could do and they said that my grandfather was a wizard, but he would just ignore them.

The canaries seemed to be his favorite birds on Ham Nghi, though he spent time with them all. The dark plumed ones—

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the magpies and the blackbirds—were always singing on their own, especially the blackbirds with their orange beaks. My grandfather came near the blackbirds and they were gabbling among themselves and he frowned at them, like they were fools to be content only with their own company. They did not need him to prompt their songs. He growled at them, "You're just a bunch of old women," and we moved on to the doves that were big-eyed and quiet and he cooed at them and he told them how pretty they were and we looked at the moorhens, pecking at the bottoms of their cages like chickens, and the cranes with their wonderful necks curling and stretching.

We visited all the birds and my grandfather loved them, and the first time we went to Ham Nghi, we ended up at the cages crowded with sparrows. He bent near their chattering and I liked these birds very much. They were small and their eyes were bright and even though the birds were crowded, they were always in motion, hopping and fluttering up and shaking themselves like my vain friends. I was a quiet little girl, but I too would sometimes look at myself in a mirror and primp and puff myself up, even as in public I tried to hold myself apart a little bit from the other girls.

I was surprised and delighted that first day when my grandfather motioned to the bird seller and began to point at sparrows and the merchant reached into the cage and caught one bird after another and he put them all into a cardboard box. My grandfather bought twelve birds and they did not fly away as they sat in the box. "Why aren't they flying?" I asked.

"Their wings are clipped," my grandfather said.

This was all right with me. They clearly weren't in any pain and they could still hop and they would never fly away from me. I wouldn't even need a cage for my vain little friends.

I'm sure that my grandfather knew what I was thinking. But he said nothing. When we got home, he gave me the box and told me to take the birds to show my mother. I found her on the back stoop slicing vegetables. I showed her the box and she said that grandfather was wonderful. She set the box down and told me to stay with her, I could help her. I crouched beside her and waited and I could hear the chattering of the sparrows from the box.

We had always kept chickens and ducks and geese. Some of

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them were pecking around near us even as I crouched there with my mother. I knew that we ate those animals, but for some reason Ham Nghi seemed like a different place altogether and the sparrows could only be for song and friendship. But finally my mother finished cutting the vegetables and she reached into the box and drew out a sparrow, its feet dangling from the bottom of her fist and its head poking out of the top. I looked at its face and I knew it was a girl and my mother said, "This is the way it's done," and she fisted her other hand around the sparrow's head and she twisted.

I don't remember how long it took me to get used to this. But I would always drift away when my grandfather went to the sparrow cages on Ham Nghi. I did not like his face when he bought them. It seemed the same as when he cooed at the doves or sang with the canaries. But I must have decided that it was all part of growing up, of becoming a woman like my mother, for it was she who killed them, after all. And she taught me to do this thing and I wanted to be just like her and I twisted the necks of the sparrows and I plucked their feathers and we roasted them and ate them and my grandfather would take a deep breath after the meal and his eyes would close in pleasure.

There were parrots, too, on Ham Nghi. They all looked very much like Mr. Green. They were the color of breadfruit leaves with a little yellow on the throat. My grandfather chose one bird each time and cocked his head at it, copying the angle of the bird's head, and my grandfather said, "Hello," or "What's your name," things he never said to Mr. Green. The parrots on Ham Nghi did not talk to my grandfather, though once one of them made a sound like the horns of the little cream and blue taxis that rushed past in the streets. But they never spoke any words, and my grandfather took care to explain to me that these parrots were too recently captured to have learned anything. He said that they were probably not as smart as Mr. Green either, but one day they would speak. Once after explaining this, he leaned near me and motioned to a parrot that was digging for mites under his wing and said, "That bird will still be alive and speaking to someone when you have grown to be an old woman and have died and are buried in the ground."

I am forty-one years old now. I go each day to the garden on the bank of the bayou that runs through this place they call

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Versailles. It is part of New Orleans but it is far from the center of the town and it is full of Vietnamese who once came from the north. My grandfather never saw the United States. I don't know what he would think. But I come to this garden each day and I crouch in the rich earth and I wear my straw hat and my black pantaloons and I grow lettuce and collards and turnip greens and mint, and my feet, which were once quite beautiful, grow coarse. My family likes the things I bring to the table.

Sometimes Mr. Green comes with me to this garden. He rides on my shoulder and he stays there for a long time, often imitating the cardinals, the sharp ricochet sound they make. Then finally Mr. Green climbs down my arm and drops to the ground and he waddles about in the garden and when he starts to bite off the stalk of a plant, I cry "Not possible" to him and he looks at me like he is angry, like I've dared to use his own words, his and his first master's, against him. I always bring twigs with me and I throw him one to chew on so that neither of us has to back down. I have always tried to preserve his dignity. He is at least fifty years older than me. My grandfather was eighteen when he himself caught Mr. Green on a trip to the highlands with his father.

So Mr. Green is quite old and old people sometimes lose their understanding of the things around them. It is not strange then that a few weeks ago Mr. Green began to pluck his feathers out. I went to the veterinarian when it became clear what was happening. A great bare spot had appeared on Mr. Green's chest and I had been finding his feathers at the foot of his perch, so I watched him one afternoon through the kitchen window. He sat there on his perch beside the door of the back porch and he pulled twelve feathers from his chest, one at a time, and felt each with his tongue and then dropped it to the floor. I came out onto the porch and he squawked at me, as if he was doing something private and I should have known better than to intrude. I sat down on the porch and he stopped.

I took Mr. Green to the veterinarian and he said that when parrots do this, it may be because they lack a certain vitamin or mineral. But more often the reason is that the bird is bored. I tried to convince myself that this is what it meant when Mr. Green stopped plucking his feathers as soon as I appeared on the porch. Keep him busy, the doctor said. So I got Mr. Green

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a new climbing tree with lots of fresh bark to peel and I spent more time with him. I took him to the garden even when he didn't ask to go, and I brought my sewing and even some of my cooking—the preparation of the foods—out onto the porch and while I did these household things, I talked to him. It was just idle chatter but there were plenty of words, and often Mr. Green looked at me sharply as I spoke and I could hear how I sounded, chattering away like a blackbird.

But I felt driven to do something for him. He was old and he was sick and I felt I had to do something. My grandfather took six months to die and he lay in a bed on the top floor of our house and Mr. Green was always on a perch beside him. I remember a wind chime at the window. It was made of brass and I've never had a wind chime in my own home because when I hear one, another sound always comes with it, the deep rattling cough of my grandfather. I would visit him in his room with my mother and once he called me back as we were about to leave. I came to him and my mother had gone on out the door and I could hear her talking rapidly with my grandmother. My grandfather motioned me to come very near and he twisted his body in the bed. His face crumpled in pain as he did it, but he forced himself because he wanted to tell me a secret. I leaned close to him. "Do you hear them talking?" he said. He nodded toward the door and he obviously meant my mother and grandmother.

"Yes," I said.

He frowned. "How foolish they sound. Chattering and yammering. All the women sound like that. You don't want to grow up sounding like all these foolish women do you?"

I did not know how to answer his question. I wanted very much to be like my mother and when my grandfather said this, I felt the recoiling begin inside me and the tears begin to rise. But my mother called my name at that moment and I did not have to find an answer to my grandfather's question. I turned my back on him and ran across the room without saying a word. As I got to the door, however, Mr. Green cried "What then?" and it sounded as if he had actually finished my grandfather's thought. You will grow up to be a woman—what then?

And maybe he did finish the thought. Parrots are very smart. Mr. Green in particular. And he knows more than just my

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grandfather's words. The Buddhists believe in the transmigration of souls, though I suppose it's impossible to transmigrate into some creature that's already alive. But after a few days of angry looks from Mr. Green when I filled the porch with talk that was intended to save his life, he began to cry "Not possible" over and over until I stopped speaking. Perhaps a male voice would have been acceptable to him, but mine was not, and then Mr. Green began to pluck himself once more, even with me sitting there in the room. I went to him when he began to do this and I said, "Not possible," but he ignored me. He did not even raise his head to look at me but tore away at his feathers, each one making a faint popping sound as it came out. Then the next day he began to cough.

I knew the cough well. But I took Mr. Green to the veterinarian and he told me what I expected, that the cough was not the bird's. This was a sound he was imitating. "Did someone in your household recently have a cold or the flu?" the doctor said.

"It is my grandfather," I said.

On the last visit to my grandfather's room he began to cough. My mother went to him and he waved her away. She backed off and I came forward, wanting to help him. He was sitting up now and hunched over and the cough rattled deep inside his chest and then there was a sudden silence and I drew nearer, thinking that my step forward had actually helped, but my grandfather lifted his face and his eyes were very sad, and I knew he was disappointed. My brothers were not yet born and I held my breath so that this silence would go on, but the sound raked up from his chest and filled the room again.

This morning I went to the back porch and Mr. Green was pulling out a feather and he did not acknowledge me, even to taunt me by calling me "sir." He dropped the feather and began to pluck another from beneath his left wing. His chest was naked now and the skin looked as slack as my grandfather's throat. I stood before him and I offered my arm for him to come and sit on my shoulder. Yesterday he had said "Not possible," but today he said nothing. He dropped a feather and leaned over and bit me hard on my arm. I bled. But I did not move my arm and he looked at me. His eyes were steady in their sadness, fully dilated, as if he was considering all of this.

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I pushed my arm to him again and he knew that he had no choice, so he climbed on, but he did not go to my shoulder.

I held my arm aloft and carried Mr. Green outside. The sun had still not burned the fog off the bayou and I went straight into the garden. My feet were bare, like a child's, and the earth was soft and wet and I crouched there and I quickly reached to Mr. Green and grasped him at his chest, lifted him and caught him with my other hand before he could struggle. His wings were pinned and he was bigger in my hands than I had ever imagined. But a Vietnamese woman is experienced in these things and Mr. Green did not have a chance even to make a sound as I laid him on his side, pinned him with my knee, slid my hands up and wrung his neck.

I pray for the soul of my grandfather. I do not bear him any anger. Sometimes I go to mass during the week. Versailles has a Catholic church just for the Vietnamese and the mass is celebrated in our language. I sit near the back and I look at the section where all the old women go. They take the Eucharist every day of their lives and they sit together wearing their traditional dresses and with their hair in scarves rolled up on their heads and I wonder if that is where I will finally end up, in the old women's section at mass each day. No one in my church will likely live as long as a parrot. But our Savior lived only thirty-three years, so maybe it's not important. There were women around Jesus when He died, the two Marys. They couldn't do anything for Him. But neither could the men, who had all run away.

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LORNA GOODISON

Recommendation for Amber

With her, you would have a guide
to the small nubians in the garden.
They live only under bushes
that have never known knives.

They come out at night
riding on seasonal cicadas
whose noise is a radar guide,
they have given her tiny boxes

of see-in space eye ointment.
A very little rubbed on the eyes
makes you see good duppies.[1]
With her Mondays could be Sunday.

She would go to church on Monday
then stay indoors all afternoon
sleeping, because there is no
difference in days with Amber.

No matter how she tries she loses
things (she is not orderly)
but she will summon them back again
by invoking their names over and over.

So if you pass outside her window
and hear her repeating insistently
"keys" or "comb," just know
that this is her strange ceremony,

[1] *Duppies*: ghosts

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the finding of lost objects.
Invariably she finds what's missing
or if it's taken, in its place will come
something amazingly much better.

She is blessed with a remarkable nose,
she can identify the ingredients
in perfumes just so, like she can
isolate the trail of the gentle tuberose

from beneath the more sensual oil slick
smell of the cat glands secreting civet.
She also knows the secret properties
of gemstones. Take amber itself her name.

Though neither rare, costly nor a gem
but the golden night sweat of a tree
compassionate and resilient, it's special
because it is self healing.

Despite her tendency to wearing her hair
wild and her slow egyptian eyes which are
fixed always above her employer's head
she has a good hand at plain cooking.

Birth Stone

The older women wise and tell Anna
first time baby mother,
"hold a stone upon your head and follow
a straight line go home."
For like how Anna was working in the
field, grassweeder
right up till the appointed hour
that the baby was to come.
Right up till the appointed hour

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when her clear heraldic water
broke free and washed her down.
Dry birth for you young mother,
the distance between field and home
come in like the Gobi desert now.
But your first baby must born abed.
Put the woman stone on your head
and walk through no man's land
go home. When you walk, the stone
and not you yet, will bear down.

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LYNN EMANUEL

The Poet in Heaven

Here in Heaven's small hotel
I have arranged my little life,
a place to eat at midday,
a place to have a drink at night.

Dying was a breathless ride,
the billboards flying past,
and then in that dark car's
dark window, like Texaco,

bloomed Heaven's swank.
And now the moon is rising
on all my lost remembrance:
I was like a sheaf of wheat

unbound, or the grass razed,
or the shadows' shuddering
run before the scythe;
that was what it was like to die.

And now I am the clouds:
a storm in small white dresses,
a ghostly rout that kneels
above the cut field's eye.

Three weeks and I've become
one whom wind rumples and pets,
one who crawls across the sky
to watch her shadow in the dust.

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TOM WAYMAN

The Heart Is Also a Meadow

The heart is also
a mountain meadow
a tangle thigh-deep of
hay, ferns
purple thistle
Indian paintbrush
the intense minuscule blue
of forget-me-not
tall angelica along a creekbed
and white-and-brown daisies
scattered everyplace
but especially where years ago
a dirt road curved through

Much could be hidden
in this foliage:
a grouse nest
with five eggs
a sudden charge by the grouse herself
or a bear
that rises out of grass
a few metres away
as if a troop of mounted warriors from another age
lifted up on their horses
weapons and tackle jangling
in the still air

Deer
thread across the meadow
by moonlight

while from a nest aloft
in the brain-stem tree
five ravens
watch

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and cry out

Near one edge of this clearing
a cabin
of planks and steeply angled tin roof
stands
None of the ordinary litter
of human habitation
surrounds it
There is only the grass
and then abruptly
this dwelling
It could be the home
of a witch
or hermit—
the door sealed
with a rusty padlock
Yet the structure
is in good repair
its windows shuttered
from within
awaiting the return of
whatever once
lived here

Fire Elegy

for Bron Wallace

How strange that an entire person
has become
ash

to be poured
into winter wind

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To me, she still listens
to a point I'm making as we talk
her lit cigarette held away from
the corner of her mouth
Then she places the cigarette
in a saucer and stands up
and walks into another room
to find a book to show me
why I'm wrong

Her voice stops
as she searches
in a different part of the house
In her kitchen
are only the sounds from the street
I watch smoke
twist upward from a cylinder
burning among stubbed ends
of ones she breathed in from
earlier

Or she is
the faint smell of such smoke
that lingers for days in my house
after a party, or a visit by certain friends
Even if I open doors, windows
to let in new air
a trace of that odor
hovers

What I sense now
of her
in every room

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

AT FIRST GLANCE THE IDEA LOOKED MISGUIDED: two concerts of song and opera early in July to celebrate the founding of the Tanglewood Music Center (*née* the Berkshire Music Center) in 1940 by Serge Koussevitzky and his Boston Symphony colleagues. Surely, those who know the place would object, the glory of the institution in its fifty years of life has been the instrumentalists who have emerged from it to populate the nation's symphony orchestras, chamber ensembles and academies: in the program booklet, Steven Ledbetter points out that more than 20 percent of the membership of America's chief orchestras are former Tanglewood fellows.

Yet, though Koussevitzky himself rarely led opera, he regarded it as of sufficient importance to ask the conductor Boris Goldovsky and the director Herbert Graf to set up an opera department for his summer school. After the war ended, Goldovsky took control of the staging of Tanglewood productions as well as the music, and the ensuing sixteen years of his stewardship are the stuff of legend. The opera department was succeeded by one that bent the pedagogic skills of Phyllis Curtin and others to the song literature, and continues to do so up to the present. So the voice has been a consistent if self-effacing element in the TMC's activity from the start.

For the two evenings, the first devoted to song in TMC's Theater-Concert Hall and the second principally to opera in the Shed, the BSO assembled a distinguished group of singer-alumni and alumnae of the TMC. So the occasion was something of a hybrid: equal parts reunion, pep rally and testimonial fete, awash in justifiable self-congratulation. It would be churlish of the critic to expect many musical satisfactions in this atmosphere, and even a glance at the programs' odd smorgasbord of musical fare should have disabused him of any anticipation.

Still, as will happen when this much talent comes together in one place, there were memorable moments. On the first evening—after the disappointing word that William Neill, who was to sing four rarely heard songs of Charles Tomlinson Griffes with the admirable Dennis Helmrich at the piano, could not be present—the bass Thomas Paul, well accompanied by pianist Martin Amlin, sang the four *Chansons de Don Quixote* of Jacques Ibert. Those who know the history of these songs will appreciate the audacity of Paul's choice, inviting comparison with Feodor Chaliapin, who first sang them in a thirties film and

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subsequently recorded them. Though Paul could not compete with the Russian bass in sheer vocal amplitude, his firm tone and forward production did justice to both music and words and gave much pleasure.

After intermission a group of four familiar Rachmaninoff songs were sung capably by tenor John Aler but were distinguished chiefly by the finely judged and stirring piano playing of Yehudi Wyner. Best of all, the baritone Sanford Sylvan, accompanied by David Breitman, brought his accustomed concentrated intensity and poise to four of Samuel Barber's *Hermit Songs*, which for a few moments held the audience rapt as only exceptional music-making can. All of the participants in the evening with the exception of Wyner, who is a faculty member, and BSO assistant conductor-designate Robert Spano were former TMC fellows.

The next evening, with Goldovsky present, the names were starrier, the pretensions greater and the program even more bizarre. It opened with a charming new commission for the occasion called *For Tanglewood: "a Celebration"* by Lukas Foss (TMC '40–'42), in which the composer's familiar aplomb in playing with rapidly shifting motifs and timbres was delightfully evident. Foss conducted his own work. Then soprano Dawn Upshaw (TMC '83), backed by the BSO and Seiji Ozawa (TMC '60), sang Anne Truelove's aria from Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* with drive and color that were badly attenuated by the Shed's yawning reaches. Shirley Verrett (TMC '54, '56) forsook the announced *"Ritorna vincitor"* from *Aïda* for the safer ground of Eboli's Veil Song from *Don Carlo*, and without the soprano part for the page Tebaldo in the refrain this was an unsettling item indeed.

Next John Aler (TMC '73) struggled with the same problem as Upshaw, in Nadir's aria from Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*. Bypassing the announced *Otello* duet because Richard Cassilly (TMC '53) was unable to join Sherrill Milnes (TMC '60–'61) for it, the first half ended with the final scene from Act I of *Tosca*, with Verrett in the title role, Milnes as Scarpia and Spiro Malas (TMC '60) as the Sacristan. The Tanglewood Festival Chorus and Tanglewood Choir under John Oliver and the Boston Boy Choir under John Dunn overwhelmed the soloists, who in any case did not work up much dramatic impact even when the choruses were silent.

Fortunately things improved after intermission, with Act III of Verdi's *Falstaff* in a "semi-staged" mode now familiar to Tanglewood regulars. David Kneuss was credited with the staging and Sarah G. Conly with the disguises worn by the participants. Thomas Stewart (TMC '54) brought sufficient energy to the title role, but not much comic flair; as Quickly, Rosalind Elias (TMC '50–'51, '53) was solid and insinuating, and the others—TMC alumni all—joined in the fun with gusto. The passage in which the women's chorus of "fairies," led by Upshaw's superbly sung "Queen" (in reality Nannetta), appear at Herne's Oak to torment Falstaff was ravishing. All was supported

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beautifully by the orchestra, which provided a number of gorgeous moments, especially the sublime epithalamium that accompanies the betrothal of Nannetta and Fenton. Though Ozawa's tempos were sometimes too deliberate for my taste, the final fugue that reconciles the characters *("Tutto nel mondo è burla")* had much cumulative force. It called to mind a fittingly Shakespearean summation for the sometimes disconcerting TMC festivities: all's well that ends well.

The summer's Mostly Mozart Festival brought along one or two novelties—a rarely heard one-act opera by Mozart, a Gade symphony—to flavor the mix of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century orchestral and chamber fare that has become a perennial Lincoln Center offering. For a Monday evening in August, the program was typical: the American String Quartet, assisted by Pinchas Zukerman on viola and André-Michel Schub on piano, with three pieces from Mozart's top drawer.

But though the program-making was typical, the music-making was not. The occasion was distinguished by a stylishness and command on the part of the American that was decidedly extraordinary. The opening statement of the String Quartet in G Major, K. 387, beautiful in its rhetorical drive and poise, set the evening on an elevated plane from which it only occasionally and briefly descended. The quartet's blend was superb, well modulated to the lean tone and refined phrasing of first violinist Peter Winograd. The four players seemed to be totally at ease with the music, sluices through which its natural flow took place unimpeded, without over-emphasis yet never turning slack. In the Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, K. 493, that followed, Schub did not quite meet the ensemble on its own ground, sounding occasionally stiff and peremptory. But on the whole this was again unusually persuasive music-making.

After intermission Zukerman added a second viola to the quartet in Mozart's String Quintet in G Minor, K. 516. Again the results were extraordinary: delicate yet strong, limited in dynamic scope but never monochromatic, always seeming to let this sometimes disturbing and sometimes amiable work speak for itself. For the record, the other members of this noteworthy group are Laurie Carney on second violin, Daniel Avshalomov on viola and David Geber on cello.

For partisans of the singing voice, the festival's chief evening of interest was the American debut of the Italian coloratura mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli. Just twenty-four years old, she was preceded by a burgeoning reputation, principally for her way with the florid music of Mozart and Rossini. What New Yorkers heard was a well schooled voice not ample enough to make Avery Fisher Hall ring, an attractive but not terribly distinctive timbre, with a solid lower range and a reedy but effective top that were well knit together. Her pitch is secure and her trill strong though shallow. Two Mozart arias—the concert piece *"Ch'io mi scordi di te?,"* K. 505, and *"Parto, parto"* from

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Clemenza di Tito, K. 621—went well, with some grace and fluency but not much character; in the latter Bartoli was upstaged somewhat by Joseph Rabbai's excellent clarinet obbligato.

Rossini's *"Tanti affetti in tal momento,"* from *La Donna del Lago*, was a different matter. Here Bartoli seemed in her element, in a Rossini rondo finale that is famously demanding and vivacious. Her tone had more sheen here, her phrasing was more easeful and her runs fleeter and more pointed. She took the closing *allegro* at a dangerous clip, and if she lacked the last measure of bravura to make it wholly satisfactory, hers was still singing of accomplishment and even greater promise.

Elsewhere on the program, Gerard Schwarz led the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra in Vanhal's Symphony in A Minor, a diverting sample of *Sturm und Drang*, in a rambunctious reading of Rossini's *Il Signor Bruschino* overture, and in a somewhat noisy traversal of Mozart's "Prague" Symphony. Though they backed up Jean-Pierre Rampal well in Pleyel's Flute Concerto in C, the flutist's minty tone could not hide his slurred rhythms and glib treatment of the solo part.

With General Director Christopher Keene now firmly at the helm, the New York City Opera seems once again in a mood to take a few risks, perhaps to underline the increasingly timid attitude toward repertoire that emanates from the wealthier precincts across Lincoln Center's plaza. Fall of 1990 sees City Opera's staging of Arnold Schönberg's *Moses und Aron*, the first by an American repertory opera company. And the house has chosen to continue its series of Leoš Janáček's operas with his last and perhaps most arcane, *From the House of the Dead* (1928).

For this adaptation of Dostoyevsky's autobiographical novel about life in a Siberian penal colony, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, Janáček fashioned his own libretto, appending to its title the phrase "in every creature a spark of God." He took passages freely from the novel, translating them from the Russian as he composed. The result is an ensemble opera from which just a few individual prisoners emerge to tell the stories of what led to their sentencing. There is no plot in the ordinary sense, and very little narrative development. Other than the long monologues, incidents are few: a newly arrived political prisoner is ordered whipped; the inmates stage two pantomimes, one based on the Don Juan legend and the other on the story of the miller's pretty wife; two prisoners clash; an injured eagle is nursed back to health by the inmates and released at the opera's end.

Janáček's score matches the work's episodic nature. Typical of his late style, motivic fragments rise in the orchestra or the vocal lines, are repeated, altered, developed and augmented, reach a climax and are superseded. The instrumental combinations are canny, piquant and arresting. The score mirrors the anguish, exaltation and humor of the action in a haunting way.

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The City Opera program booklet quotes a musicologist, John Tyrell, as saying that "the interaction between characters that seems lacking on the surface is there . . . at a deeper level in the monologues." I think Tyrell would be hard put to marshal convincing evidence for the statement. Except for one credulity-straining coincidence (Janáček's own invention), and an implied homosexual relationship between the political prisoner and a youthful inmate, the characters fail to connect in any but the most glancing way. And even through the three extended monologues of Skuratov, Luka and Shishkov, we get to know these men only slightly. The subtle and imaginative music tells us much, but cannot rescue the work—a short one at just under two hours—from finally seeming desultory.

The City Opera team did what it could with this difficult assignment. The sets and costumes, by John Conklin, were appropriately stark and monochrome, yet avoided cliché (no jackboots or bullwhips). Rhoda Levine's direction was fluent, and the little plays-within-a-play were stylish, effectively free of self-consciousness yet nicely antic. The cast—all male except for a brief appearance by a prostitute, and the role of the boy, sung by a soprano—was without exception strong. Perhaps best of all was Jon Garrison as the addled Skuratov, because he articulated the text, an English translation by Yveta Synek Graff and Robert T. Jones, so that much of it could be understood. But almost equally good was Eugene Perry, who brought intensity and poignancy to the wife-killer Shishkov's long narration.

Janáček died before making final corrections on the copyist's score of the opera, and consequently it existed until the sixties only in a "corrected" performing edition by three of his colleagues. Sir Charles Makerras, the conductor and a Janáček devotee, has since prepared an edition close to the composer's original intentions, and it is this that Christopher Keene led, with considerable feeling for the idiom. The orchestra played more securely and tellingly than I have heard it do in some time.

This was an instance in which even a dissenter like me would concede that the supertitles, by Roberta Vincent Edles, were helpful, but they sometimes departed from what the singers were singing ("trap" became "mouth" above the proscenium), and some of the action on stage remained obscure. But the latter must be blamed at least as much on the composer-librettist as on the interpreters.

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RICHARD HORNBY

The Stratford Festival, Ontario, Canada

THE STRATFORD FESTIVAL IN CANADA, which just completed its thirty-eighth year, remains the best Shakespearean repertory company in the Western Hemisphere. Alas, it has little competition. Although there are professional Shakespeare festivals in every state of the Union, plus the District of Columbia, few of them operate with permanent acting companies, and fewer still have true rotating repertory; nowhere but at Stratford can you see nine different plays in a week, as I did last summer, and still not exhaust their current selection. The sheer size of the operation is staggering—800 employees, 95 actors, three theatres, up to 15 plays rotating at once. (There are eight people in the *wig* department!) The Festival is the only thing in English-speaking North America that can match the great European theatre companies of London, Paris, Berlin, or Moscow, yet it is set in a sleepy rural town in southern Ontario.

More important than size, of course, is the consistent level of quality. If you want to see classical plays done with clarity, vigor, and imagination, performed by actors who speak well and have a strong sense of characterization, supported by superb designers and technicians, you will find them within two hours' drive of our northern border. If you want to see the same plays done with self-indulgent gimmickry, performed by actors who haven't the slightest idea of what they are doing, try your local Shakespeare festival. There are exceptions, of course; we do have some good companies, though none on the scale of Stratford, and the Canadians do not hit the mark with every single production. When they fail, however, it is usually because of weak direction; the actors are at least audible, and interesting to watch. When we fail, it is usually because of *strong* direction, from an individual whose main objective is to draw attention to himself. At most American productions of the classics these days, you are supposed to go away saying, "What a brilliant director!" At Stratford, you are supposed to say, "What a brilliant play!"

David William became Artistic Director of the Festival in 1990. Like most of the artistic directors at Stratford, he is British by birth. (There have been two Canadians and five from the British Isles, but no Americans. In Canada, nationalism usually means anti-Americanism; when I lived in Vancouver, I heard a radio commentator with a heavy

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Scottish burr railing against the appointment of an American "foreigner" as curator of a local museum.) William has directed, acted, and taught all over the world, however, and has done many productions at Stratford; thoroughly familiar with the Canadian scene, he is a person of intelligence, breadth, and good taste, who is certainly not trying to impose some idiosyncratic personal approach on the colonials. Indeed, if his first season could be faulted (and I should say it was the best I have ever seen at Stratford), it would be on the grounds that it was overly eclectic, not only in the choice of plays—five from the Elizabethan/Jacobean period, plus a Restoration comedy, a French neoclassical tragedy, a Russian double bill, an O'Neill play, three modern Canadian plays (one translated from the French), and an American musical comedy—but also in production styles. The four Shakespeare plays were set and costumed in an unbelievable hodgepodge of periods, none of them Shakespeare's. Nevertheless, somehow the productions seemed to transcend their eccentricities so that the Shakespearean glories shone through.

In fact, the most conservatively staged production, *Macbeth*, was the weakest. Brian Bedford, a noted British actor who can usually be counted on to give a solid performance, was stiff and awkward in the title role, as was his Canadian co-star, Goldie Semple. Bedford exhibited a surprising amount of facial tension, with his forehead contorted and his mouth twisted to one side, so that even his diction was off, an unusual thing with either British *or* Canadian actors. He and Semple seemed to force the quiet speeches, yet fall short in intensity in the passionate ones, especially in the first half of the play.

Both actors improved in the second half, however. Here Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are reactive, while in the initial wave of the play they are its driving force; modern actors typically find reacting easier than propelling. Semple came off particularly well in the sleepwalking scene. Most actresses play this with a vague dreaminess, but Semple had a frenetic, jerking quality instead, picking up the desperate rhythm of the handwashing and letting it affect her movements and manner of speaking. Michael Chekhov, nephew of the playwright, was a great acting teacher who stressed what he called the "psychological gesture"; the actor was supposed to find a gesture that was expressive of the character's inner drives, which would then affect every aspect of his performance. Semple's playing here was an example of how effective Chekhov's technique can be.

Macbeth, which David William and Robert Beard co-directed, had costumes by Debra Hanson that included tunics and kilts, which were not actually worn in Scotland before the eighteenth century. That was a mild anachronism, however, compared to those in *Julius Caesar*, where Ultz's costumes ranged from togas to T-shirts. In every scene, the mono-monikered Mr. Ultz would perpetrate some new horror, like jackets with "TRIBUNE SPQR" on the back, or Cicero made to look like a marble statue, complete with white makeup. Excessive

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historical accuracy is a mistake when setting or costuming Shakespeare; a certain ambiguity about space and time is usually a virtue. Nevertheless, the actors should at least look as if they are all in the same play!

Yet despite the daffy costuming, *Julius Caesar* turned out to be a superb production, briskly performed with beautiful speech and strong, clear action. Nicholas Pennell, one of Canada's finest actors who is always worth seeing at Stratford, was an authoritative Caesar; Brian Bedford dropped his mannerisms to create a sensitive Brutus; Colm Feore was a vigorous Cassius; Scott Wentworth, a small but robust actor, an equally vigorous Mark Antony. *Caesar* is a panoramic play, requiring a feeling of spaciousness; many scenes are set in small parts of a large area, like the Roman Forum or the battlefield at Philippi. Director Richard Monette, a long-time actor who has turned to directing in recent years with impressive results, solved the space problem by using the entire auditorium for the big outdoor scenes. The Festival Theatre at Stratford is famous for its thrust stage, designed thirty-five years ago by Tanya Moiseiwitsch, which is surrounded on three sides by some 2400 seats. Because of its configuration, and good acoustics, the theatre has a remarkably intimate feeling for its size, yet when the auditorium is incorporated into the production, as here, it also can seem vast. The Act I storm scene was particularly impressive, with flashing fluorescent lights around the back of the auditorium to suggest lightning, while the conspirators entered, drenched, to plan the assassination. You not only knew where they were, but you felt it too.

Monette also directed *As You Like It* at the Festival Theatre, which he set "in and around Quebec City and on L'Isle D'Orléans in the late fall of 1758." This gave the production a quaint charm, with lovely eighteenth-century costumes and a north-woods setting by Debra Hanson, and perhaps satisfied impulses toward Canadian nationalism, but, like most bright-idea approaches to Shakespeare, it ran up against details in the text that clashed awkwardly with the concept. There are many references to clothing, for example, including a few to "doublet and hose"—which, of course, no one was actually wearing. Touchstone was played as a big heavy Scot, who had apparently wandered over to Quebec from Nova Scotia, with his "motley" being a tartan kilt. Ultz's costumes for *Caesar* at least told you who the characters were, but I doubt if anyone in the audience unfamiliar with *As You Like It* knew that Touchstone was supposed to be the jester from Duke Frederick's court.

The pretty setting caused a similar problem. One trouble with a "concept" approach to Shakespeare is that many of his plays have *contrasting* settings—Venice and Belmont, Rome and Egypt, Lear's palace and the heath. Unless the concept embodies a similar contrast, the play will lose a major source of its conflict, and hence become less dramatic. In *As You Like It*, the contrast is between the brittle world of

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Duke Frederick's court, full of spiteful, bickering people, and the "green world" of the Forest of Arden, where all is harmonized and resolved. Monette's production opened with laborers singing a Québecois folk song, surrounded by trees covered with beautiful autumnal leaves, and baskets and barrels of produce. But in Shakespeare's text, nobody sings in Duke Frederick's domain (unlike the Forest scenes, which have all the famous songs); it is a cold, sterile world, where the principal form of entertainment is cracking men's ribs in wrestling matches, which Rosalind describes as "broken music." Hanson's setting was always pretty, so that court and forest seemed like the same place. People are supposed to *escape* from the court to the forest in *As You Like It*, rather than merely wander about in a Disneyland.

Nevertheless, the acting once again transcended the concept. The actors were uniformly relaxed, vivid, and well-spoken (although they continued the common error of pronouncing Jaques's name as "Jay Kwees," which throws the meter off). Lucy Peacock carried the play as a particularly delightful Rosalind, seeming appropriately masculine in her disguise as "Ganymede," yet at the same time not losing her beauty or underlying femininity; Artistic Director William himself played Jaques deftly, counterpointing Peacock with a sour, mournful performance. The overall lively action showed director Monette's usual astute sense of clarity, rhythm, and pace, three qualities that are essential to good directing, yet unfortunately so rare.

The Merry Wives of Windsor, directed by Bernard Hopkins at the Avon Theatre, a proscenium house in downtown Stratford, was the most engaging production of the play that I have ever seen. Christina Poddubiuk's Edwardian costumes were too elegant for the piece, Shakespeare's least aristocratic play (of all the characters, only Falstaff is a nobleman, and he is hardly a paragon of refinement), but at least they did not jar with the text in any major way, and they were a joy to look at. Adding to the delight, Allan Stichbury's simple, abstracted settings made Windsor seem like an Edwardian resort town, complete with dancing bears and an Oompah band, which gave the proper whimsical tone to the play's silly story.

James Blendick was a dapper Falstaff, fat but light on his feet, and wonderfully appetitive, whether in sipping wine or sneaking a glance up Mistress Ford's skirt. His beautiful, extravagant costumes made his dousing in the ditch all the funnier, though they seemed a little odd considering his supposedly impoverished state, which is the reason for his simultaneous pursuit of Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. Perhaps he had understanding creditors!

Roberta Maxwell and Patricia Conolly were delightful as the merry wives Ford and Page, but the most interesting and compelling performance in the show was by Colm Feore as Ford. Of all the actors I have seen in the role, including Ben Kingsley in a fine production at the English Stratford, Feore is the first to make me realize the affinity

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of the character with Shakespeare's other jealous husbands, Othello, Leontes, and Posthumus. Feore's jealousy seemed just as intense as theirs, yet utterly comical. He developed a wild gleam in his eye, and a monomaniacal concentration. When Falstaff returns to Mistress Page after his initial, disastrous assignation, Feore, convinced that Falstaff was once again hidden in the clothes hamper, exploded into the room, leapt up on a chaise, and triumphantly planted his foot on the hamper's lid, calling for his wife to come forth and behold his quarry. He then dove into the hamper, flinging clothes out as if each item were the naughty Falstaff himself; then, turning his wrath on an old woman (actually, Falstaff in disguise), beat her with a broomstick as he chased her offstage, returning with the thing broken in half! Such energy and inventiveness were characteristic of the entire, wonderfully funny production. The comic business was never mere clowning for its own sake, but always served to tell the story.

The non-Shakespearean plays at Stratford included a beautifully performed production of *Love for Love*; a heavy-handed version of *Ah, Wilderness!*; a surprisingly credible *Guys and Dolls*; a one-dimensional *Forever Yours, Marie-Lou*, a sour, talky play by Quebec author Michel Tremblay; and a sensitive production of David Storey's *Home*, a subtle piece set in a mental hospital. Congreve's *Love for Love*, like his *The Way of the World*, is a complex Restoration comedy about sex and money. Its central device, of having the hero Valentine feign madness to avoid losing his inheritance, has sometimes caused it to be compared to *Hamlet*, but it is far more complicated. The strength of this production, directed by David William, was that its intricacies were always made clear and hilarious. Every performance by the perfectly balanced, large cast was so well defined, vivid, and funny, that it is unfair to single out a few, but I will anyway: Colm Feore, in a role totally different from the obsessive Ford, was handsome, clever, and engaging as Valentine; Roberta Maxwell gave an outrageous performance of Mrs. Frail as a kind of seventeenth-century Mae West; Edward Atienza was endlessly comical as the fussy, superstitious old Foresight.

Ann Curtis' gorgeous costumes were set in the period, yet their limited color palette—primarily browns, creams, and beiges—made them seem elegant and distant, like an old sepia photograph. Stephanie Howard's settings—mostly wood-paneled interiors—matched their color scheme and elegance. The sets and costumes provided a good example of how designers can be creative without setting the play in some wildly different era, or coming up with eccentric individual choices. Whether a director or a designer is a creative artist depends on your definition of creativity. Nowadays, we unfortunately tend to define this as having no antecedents, totally original, novel for its own sake. If we would instead see it as *carrying on* the playwright's creativity, rather than ignoring it, the results would be more often like

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the designs for *Love for Love*, which were by far the most genuinely imaginative and effective of the Festival.

Similarly, when the director sees his or her task as *telling the play's story*, rather than as adding stuff that has nothing to do with it, the results may not be "creative" enough to make the theatre history texts, but they certainly are more entertaining to watch. A small example from William's staging of *Love for Love* will demonstrate what I mean: When Ben, Valentine's sailor brother, comes back from sea in the middle of the play, he flirts with Mrs. Frail in a series of intricate seafaring metaphors that can be very hard for a modern audience to follow, ending with "an you come to sea in a high wind, you mayn't carry so much sail o' your head— . . . an you do, you may run the risk to be overset, and then you'll carry your keels above water, he! he! he!" First of all, it is important that Mrs. Frail's costume include a headdress resembling a sail, which Roberta Maxwell indeed had. (This may seem obvious, but it is the kind of detail that "concept" directors frequently miss.) She also was made to look very bosomy, which added to the notion of top-heaviness, and gave it a sexual innuendo, which was intensified when Ben literally flipped her over on "keels above water," exposing her legs. None of this business is in the text as such, but it grew out of it and made the underlying objectives clear, drawing a solid laugh from the audience. The moment was creative, but William's creativity was inspired by the text—specifically, Ben's rough character, his designs on the sexy Mrs. Frail, and the double-entendre of the word "overset"—rather than by a private directorial muse, thus helping the audience to understand a lot of typically difficult baroque wordplay.

Ah, Wilderness!, also at the Avon, was, as noted, a failure. I would have thought it easy to stage (certainly easier than *Love for Love*), but Director Vivian Matalon turned it into a clumsy farce. Just as directors often overlook the comic elements in O'Neill's tragedies, so do they typically overlook the darker elements in this, his only comedy. A production should not belabor Uncle Sid's alcoholism, the young hero's sensitivity, or the pathos of the prostitute he encounters, but neither should it play the characters solely for caricature. Andrew Dolha was particularly irritating as Richard, portraying the would-be poet as a young ninny, mispronouncing every poem he quotes in order to get cheap laughs. Also, director Matalon seemed to believe that audiences are deaf, having all the actors shout so much that they even seemed too loud in row N, where I was sitting.

I have long believed that Canadians, like the British, can't do American musical comedies, but lately they have been getting better. *Guys and Dolls*, one of my favorites, was well staged (by Brian MacDonald, at the Festival Theatre), well acted, and well sung. Frank Loesser's score, full of musical jokes and sophisticated convolutions, is a difficult one, but the performers made it sound easy. The flexible Scott Wentworth was especially impressive as the gambler hero Sky

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Masterson, handling "My Time of Day," with its bebop rhythms and intervals, with ease and charm. Unfortunately, the orchestra, conducted by Berthold Carrière, sounded rather thin and unassertive; the thrust stage at the Festival Theatre meant that it had to play offstage, out of sight, but the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis managed to do the show in 1983 under the same circumstances (its stage is modeled on the one at Stratford) with an orchestra that sounded marvelous.

Michel Tremblay is one of Canada's best playwrights. Though an ardent Quebec nationalist, he certainly does not glorify his fellow Quebeckers. *Forever Yours, Marie-Lou* depicts a shattered French-Canadian family, with an alcoholic lout of a father; a repressed and spiteful mother; their equally repressed daughter, Manon; and another daughter, Carmen, who has escaped the suffocating household by becoming a country-western singer. The play consists of a confrontation between the daughters in the family kitchen, counterpointed by monologues and quarrels by the mother and father, who are now dead. (He apparently killed them both by purposefully crashing their car.)

The play is far from being one of Tremblay's best. There is endless dwelling on drunkenness, sickness, and bodily functions; sex is something dirty, religion merely an excuse for masochism. A very static play (the mother and father never move, the daughters only rarely), it was not well suited to the Festival's Third Stage Theatre, with its long open platform, and not particularly well performed. The actors (Susan Wright and Shaun Austin-Olsen as the mother and father, Marti Maraden and Julia Winder as Manon and Carmen) compounded the play's dreariness by playing monochromatically. Not all the lines needed to be delivered brutally; some are funny, others are whimsical, and there are even hints of tenderness. The more monotone the play, the more the actors should seek out its variations, however few they may be.

David Storey's *Home*, written twenty years ago, was a vehicle for Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud at the Royal Court Theatre in London, home of avant-garde playwriting since the days of Granville-Barker and Bernard Shaw. Two middle-aged gentlemen named Harry and Jack meet in some kind of park. Their chit-chat is so monosyllabic and banal that they would seem incredibly shallow, if they did not go on at such ominous length. Never coming to any point, they talk of the weather, the war, their wives, flowers, religion ("Catholic or Anglican?" "Well, couldn't really make up my mind." "Both got a great deal to offer." "Great deal? My word."), family, boats, money, clothes.

In a second scene, two middle-aged cockney women, apparently acquaintances of the men, have a chat in the same location. They seem as vague as the men, but much more earthy; they make sexual innuendoes, which shock Harry and Jack, and one of the women likes

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to show off her legs. By this time, it has become clear that they are not in a park or at a resort, but are patients at a mental hospital, which becomes even more obvious when a fifth character appears, a dazed young man who walks around ritualistically lifting chairs and tables. The beauty of the play is that, despite its mentally ill characters, it never becomes psychological. We never learn much about their backgrounds; instead of explaining them away, Storey makes us aware of them as individualized, sensitive human beings. At the end of the afternoon, the women and the young man go inside, while Harry weeps for some unknown reason, and Jack begins to weep as well. Storey, as usual, has managed to make banality seem strange, melancholy, and poetic.

James Blendick and Nicholas Pennell were splendid as Harry and Jack. (Oddly enough, although Blendick resembles Richardson, and Pennell resembles Gielgud, they played the opposite roles from their counterparts.) The sensitive performances of the men were matched by the vigor of Barbara Bryne and Pat Galloway as the women, and the stolid forcefulness of Robert King as the young man. Unfortunately, Storey is not well known outside Britain, so that the production was poorly attended the night I saw it. Such lovely performances of a very moving play deserved more attention. If you go to Stratford, don't stick only to the standard brand names in choosing what to see.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

The Emperor, His Clothes & His Critics

THE 1980S WAS NOT A DECADE OF GREAT ART, but it was a spectacular time for art exhibition and art theory. If this seems a dubious trade-off (and it is), all that can be said is that Whitman's observation about poets and their audiences applies every bit as much to painters and sculptors. Great artists will emerge again, in their usual unpredictable fashion, when great audiences are ready for them. What we have now are large audiences for ever more sumptuous displays of art and ever more erudite criticism and aesthetic-political discourse, audiences which distrust the very idea of modern masterpieces.

A word, first, about art exhibitions in the decade just passed. It's hard to be anything but grateful about the unprecedented quantity, quality, and diversity of shows put together by American museums in recent years. In New York the number of first-rate exhibitions of Old Masters and respected Modernists was staggering. Boston's Museum of Fine Arts presented a lavish, systematic examination of French art (from Chardin in 1979 to Monet in 1990) that was an education in itself. El Greco, Rodin, Watteau, O'Keeffe, Gauguin, and Matisse at the National Gallery, Poussin in Fort Worth, Eakins and Jasper Johns in Philadelphia, Abstract Expressionism in Buffalo: to have traveled across the country in the last several years to see these mammoth shows was to experience art works at their most compelling, intense, and expertly presented.

And yet these exhibitions, especially those well-advertised "blockbusters" like the O'Keeffe or Van Gogh shows or Boston's Renoir extravaganza, which came complete with the inevitable acoustiguides, videos, and avalanche of poster and shopping bag reproductions, brought with them an unexpected problem. Museum- and gallery-goers began to associate fanfare with quality, curators and trustees to link crowds with success. "Hype" and market strategy were made part of the museum and gallery lexicon, and the quiet, informed rapport between viewer and art work usually thought essential for the enjoyment of art was lost along the way. The madness of the auction houses, where fine paintings ceased to be paintings but became icons of national or corporate affluence, was only a more extreme illustration of the same dilemma. This is no small problem,

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and it forms an essential background for any consideration of art in the 1980s.

Likewise, artists, art teachers, and art writers became even better educated in the 1980s. Today Arthur Dove would have an M.F.A. from a reputable East Coast or California graduate program, and Apollinaire would finish his orals before attempting any explication of the Cubists. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, of course (it's not nice to be curmudgeonly about education)—but, once again, there is a worm in the apple that has to be taken into account. When most of the better-known artists, teachers, and writers have advanced degrees, often from the same schools, and when most people writing about art are university-molded and politically savvy, two developments are likely to ensue. We can be blessed by the creation of art works that are intelligent, sophisticated, and explicitly linked to the troubling realities of life around us, and indeed this is an experience that the art of the 1980s has offered. But another, crucial possibility is that we will be bombarded with art works that demonstrate a predominance of political passion and philosophical seriousness over aesthetic accomplishment, that tell of an increasingly uneasy balance between theoretical and visual demands.

"Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective," a spring exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, dealt in large part with just those artists who are most alert to the age we live in and its confused political, economic, and sexual values. The ethos of the show was as far removed from the purely formalist concerns of painters like Frank Stella or Ellsworth Kelly as it is possible to be. No art for art's sake anywhere in sight. These eight men and seven women situate themselves in an aesthetic framework that makes it impossible to ignore the technological revolution, AIDS, sexism, racial divisions, environmental ruin, the decline of serious political dialogue, and a dozen other pressing topics.

There was something a bit solipsistic in guest curator Kathy Halbreich's selections, though she wisely balanced the too-famous, almost predictable Big Names—e.g., Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, Francesco Clemente—with a few artists who are less well known in America, like Katharina Fritsch, Yasumasa Morimura, and Jeff Wall. Clemente's painterly studies of self-alienation seemed at odds with the non-painterly, conceptual nature of much of the rest of the show; certainly his pictures form a peculiar contrast to Katharina Fritsch's plastic cats and tacky madonnas, the products of Fritsch's skepticism about the old reverence for "unique" or handcrafted art objects. In a vein more aligned with Fritsch than Clemente, Jeff Koons's warmed-over Dadaism—his Hoover vacuum cleaners under glass and basketballs floating in water-filled vitrines—relentlessly directs our attention to the true subjects of modern desire, just as Sherrie Levine's plagiarized (or "appropriated") photographs

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question our supposed faith in originality in a time when even museums are obsessively involved with reproduction, a process which diminishes the "aura" of original art. Jenny Holzer's language-based works, like her series of "Truisms" inscribed on marble benches, have long since lost their edge for me (maybe she's been seen in too many group shows of late), but one room in "Culture and Commentary" was given over to a very clever, fully successful reflection of today's dulled sensibilities. The Robert Gober wallpaper that covered the walls of this room, a parody of any suburban bedroom motif, depicted a lynched black man hanging from a tree and a white man curled up under the covers; both images appeared dozens of times on a pale background, in the repetitious pattern of most wallpaper. The only pictures hung in the room on Gober's wallpaper were Levine's funny casein-on-wood drawings, e.g., her cartoon ostriches burying their heads in buckets of sand. We aren't kept awake by the packaged traumas of the nightly news, and—if the beaches have been paved over for condos—a mobile bucket will do for ignoring the unpleasantness we want to avoid.

Julian Schnabel's presence in this generally thoughtful company was a disappointment; it will be a while yet, I suppose, before curators stop taking these dismal pictures seriously. His bloated, crudely constructed paintings on velvet aren't really kitsch, we are supposed to infer, but a comment on kitsch—take a number, Mr. Schnabel—just as the gimmicky attachment of chunks of broken crockery to some of the canvases is really a technique that "defiantly deride[s] the Modernist's faith in the flatness of the picture plane."[1] All this glorious three-dimensionality comes, mind you, twenty years after Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, and three dozen other artists fought and won that skirmish.

Far more intriguing than the seven Schnabels in the Hirshhorn show were the six photographs of Yasumasa Morimura, many of which allude ironically to the hegemony of European art, and Tony Cragg's four inventive mixed-media sculptures. Morimura's portraits and "doublannages," as he calls them, incorporate the artist himself in jarring ways; nude, in a blonde female wig, a Japanese man lounges on a couch in the manner and with all the accoutrements of Manet's *Olympia*, or dons two hats and a fur coat and poses in the style of Man Ray's photo of Rrose Selavy. With great wit, an Asian aligns himself with a once-dominant Occidental sense of values and art history. (A timely theme following Japan's recent Van Gogh acquisitions—a well-heeled buying-into, or appropriation of, Western culture.) Tony Cragg takes bits and pieces of rubbish (bottles, combs, sections of plastic and rubber), the varied remnants of a consumer culture that discards more than it re-uses, and arranges these fragments into

[1] Kathy Halbreich, CULTURE AND COMMENTARY: An Eighties Perspective, exhibition catalogue, p. 100. Smithsonian Press. $25.00.

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suggestive forms, sometimes human figures or logos, on the gallery wall. It is as if we're being offered a modern version of Lascaux. The crucial difference is that Cragg's cave drawings don't deal with a primitive mastery of the outer world but with our loss of control and impending dissolution, a society's crazed love affair with all that is disposable.

The last room of the exhibition featured an oddly optimistic emblem of The Age of Information, Siah Armjani's *Sacco & Vanzetti Reading Room #4*, a wood, brick, and aluminum installation filled with seats and periodicals and newspapers.

"Culture and Commentary" was, for this viewer, an intellectually engaging exhibition. It was also a visually meager experience, and this divided reaction is at the heart of my frustration with so much—but not all—of the art created in the 1980s. It could be argued that "retinal pleasures" of the kind scorned by Marcel Duchamp, hallowed forefather of contemporary art, have no place in the modern scheme of things. An appeal to the eye is linked to sensual satisfactions artists don't always want to provide anymore. Fair enough: no one goes to a Samuel Beckett play and laments the absence of character development or a riveting plot. Still, I am not convinced that the visual aridity of the art of people like Fritsch and Holzer, or the pathetically thin content found in the works of Schnabel and Koons, have to be embraced as some sort of an aesthetic tonic, a medicine that is initially unpleasant but ultimately good for us.

A quite different approach to surveying the eighties was seen last summer in an ambitious exhibition with an equally ambitious title. "The Decade Show," in fact, required three spaces to tell its story, and was on view from June through August at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo and the Studio Museum of Harlem.

The show's organizers selected works that pertained to three somewhat amorphous categories: those that dealt with "myth/spirituality/nature" and "discourse/media" were seen at the New Museum, those concerned with "history/memory/artifact" and "social criticism/cultural practices" were at the Studio Museum, and those involved with "biography/autobiography" and "sexuality/gender" were at the Hispanic Museum. It wasn't always possible to tell why a particular painting or construction had been placed in one setting rather than another—most works of art, if they're at all complex, are going to straddle thematic lines—but ultimately that didn't matter. What mattered was the cumulative impact, the healthy sense of diversity and the useful questioning of the old rules. If "Culture and Commentary" was a smart, refined, "establishment-avant garde" exhibition, this venture was a kind of Armory Show for the under-recognized. Women, gays, Native-, Asian-, Latin-, and African-Americans formed a solid majority. As curator Marcia Tucker ob-

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served, rather than presenting yet another "very white, very male, very mainstream view" of the time, she and her collaborators were after "a much more slippery, heterogeneous, complicated, and difficult" summary[2] of what Barbara Ehrenreich has recently termed "The Worst Years of Our Lives."

Despite the fact that a few of the old stand-bys like Eric Fischl and Cindy Sherman were included (pointlessly, as far as I could tell), and that some artists were present more for affirmative-action reasons than artistic ones (Jaune Quick-To-See Smith is a terrible painter, for instance, but she practically corners the market on Shoshone-Blackfoot women oil painters), most of the curators' selections made sense on the grounds of both talent and politics. These ranged from the well-known to those who are too frequently seen only in specialized, segregated contexts, e.g., group shows of Latino painters, to the completely unfamiliar. Their common link was their interest in balancing visually stimulating, physically assertive creations with a content that was often biographically, ethnically, or politically inspired. Not surprisingly, the once-sacred ideas of Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg about "significant form" and aesthetic purity take a beating in the show's lengthy and provocative (and well-written) catalogue and, implicitly, by way of the art itself. In brief, this was a rowdy, contentious collection of anti-formalist, even narrative work that pointed a finger at the glossy art magazines and big-time museums and all their slanted pronouncements about what is aesthetically and historically significant to our culture.

Among the most memorable images for me were those that seemed most angry and most humorous. David Wojnarowicz, late of N.E.A. fame, created an elaborate installation of savage sarcasm about Americans' indifference to the victims of the AIDS epidemic; Luis Cruz Azceta's painting on the same theme depicts a skeletal figure in a coffin, viewed from above, surrounded by a field of numbers escalating without end. Equally disturbing, Pat Ward Williams' mixed-media work involves a copy of a 1941 *Life* photograph of a tortured black man in the American South and questions our use of this man's real-life agony as an object of visual curiosity and social documentation. In a different spirit, Robert Colescott's *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama*, an aggressive reworking of Picasso's masterpiece, is as biting as anything he's done in his tireless, obstreperous, comic attack on racial stereotyping. Ben Sakoguchi—one of the real discoveries of the show for me—borrows an advertising format in his "orange crate label" series that caricatures commodities and ideas-as-commodities, and Ken Chu uses a highly animated form of construction to consider the problems of his heritage here. In Chu's *Meanwhile Somewhere in Chinatown*, Charlie Chan hands out condoms as he is incongruously

[2] Marcia Tucker, "Directors' Introduction," THE DECADE SHOW: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s, exhibition catalogue, p. 9. $45.00.

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enlisted in white America's safe-sex campaign, while the young Oriental in front of his mirror in *I Need Some More Hair Products* readies himself for a date, engulfed by symbols of West-Coast teenage life (car, surfboard, bowling pins, fast food) and a dream of transformation into the white, blond beach-boy ideal.

Uneven and jumbled as it was bound to be, "The Decade Show" had more than enough high points to make its thesis a cogent one. The forceful painting of Jorge Tacla, Emilio Cruz, and Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, the superb photographs of John Coplans and the much-maligned Andres Serrano, the clever sculpture of Maria Brito-Avellana, and the raucous street tableaux of Martin Wong—these are works of art that contest a few of the darker tenets of Post-Modernism and the complacency of the mainstream hierarchy. We are being told, rightly I think, that the drive to make objects that are original and communicative hasn't passed from the scene yet, and that those names and pictures, approved by the Whitney or Castelli & Co., that purport to define our age do not tell anything like the whole story.

A brief concluding note about two exhibitions that, seen in the same week, might be said to define the poles of contemporary art. I should also say that it was no coincidence that one of these shows was much-discussed while the other was barely covered in the art press.

Far and away the most discouraging recent large-scale exhibition was the Robert Longo retrospective. It originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and concluded its year-long tour, where I finally caught it, at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. Longo is a highly successful, hyper-energetic artist in his thirties, the paradigm of the creative figure (usually male) who accepts that he lives in a time when to speak quietly is not to be heard, when to ignore corporate power and technological glitz is to miss the whole point.

Now, many things trouble Robert Longo, most of which are sensible things to be worried about. He looks around him and sees a society in love with power, money, size, speed, volume, tension, and manufactured drama, a culture that has no place for the contemplative individual and no interest in spiritual values. And in his more abstract works, Longo ably conveys the texture of the anxiety he wants us to feel. *Dumb Running* is comprised simply of four large gold-leafed cylinders that periodically spin on the wall at a disturbingly high speed, unsettling the viewer who feels a loss of control once this titanic sculpture starts to move, while his AIDS sculpture—a huge dark metal disc attached to the wall that excretes onto the floor a stringy mass of black wires from a hole in its surface—is eerie, visually arresting, and true to its horrific subject. Unfortunately, in his more bombastic representational pieces Longo's artistry is sacrificed to his desperate need to be heard, and some pretty shallow, trendy theatrical instincts take over.

The sleek double-panel *Pressure* shows a troubled mime in white

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face brooding beneath the oppressive weight of deathly white skyscrapers, an image more sentimental than poignant. *Now Is A Creature: The Fly* takes that theme even further and depicts a screaming man on all fours with those skyscrapers, now rust-colored, attaching themselves to and deforming his body. *All You Zombies*, a real favorite with Longo fans, is even more histrionic. An enormous, tortured cast-bronze figure, a Flash Gordon/Francis Bacon form in gladiatorial clothes, rotates on a platform against the brightly painted backdrop of a genteel opera house. Ponder the plight of the rebel or the renegade artist, or modern man treated as an object in the arena of "civilization," tormented by his infatuation with power: heavy stuff.

Robert Longo's art is a victim of, not a comment on, the ills he is addressing. Earnest, breathless, dynamic, a bit crass, devoid of subtlety, intricacy, or any food for thought, his corny images rail at stultification and dehumanization and then get right down there in the muck. For anyone who still keeps abreast of art-world ironies, let it be noted that the Longo retrospective was bountifully (make that: very bountifully) supported by A.T.& T.

In sharp contrast to the Longo show, a recent survey of contemporary Puerto Rican painting, sculpture, and mixed-media work at the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Massachusetts was refreshingly honest. "Nuevo Arte de Puerto Rico," organized by Hollister Sturges (the museum's director and a discerning advocate of Latin American art) wasn't a collection of academic work, a replay of Tamayo or Botero, or a statement on behalf of an old-fashioned art-as-craft sensibility. These nine painters, more Modernists than Post-Modernists, still believe in the expressive possibilities of wood, clay, oil on canvas, and found objects as a means of grappling with conflicts of personal and cultural identity. The results were energetic, varied in style, and completely self-confident.

Arnaldo Roche-Rabell's heavily textured self-portraits and dream scenes are built up of slashes, slabs, and masses of rich color, a blend of Action Painting brushwork and classic Expressionism; Jaime Suarez skillfully turns clay and wood into objects suggesting ancient rituals now abandoned and decaying earth-colored reliefs; Nick Quijano's gouaches are decorative records of life in the Bronx and Puerto Rico; Carlos Collazo creates aching self-portraits that manage to look both photographically exact and dream-like. (Collazo's decision to depict himself, at thirty-four, with a shaved head is especially unnerving with the associations of religious mortification and modern sexual illness it brings to mind.) All of these artists exhibit a very special and intense sense of color.

So why didn't this small, fascinating show make the rounds of more high-profile museums? Because "contemporary art" for most people still means that work, theoretically correct, which is produced and discussed in Manhattan and Europe and California, not in San Juan or Ponce.

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On balance, I don't really think the Emperor is out there buck naked. Surely Robert Hughes in his recent *New Republic* essay is exaggerating when he calls the 1980s the worst decade of American art. (Remember that the thirties and the seventies weren't all that grand—while major figures like Sean Scully and Nancy Graves have produced their best work in the last ten years and young artists like Roche-Rabell and Collazo are just entering their prime.) Unfortunately, most of those watching the parade don't seem to be able to tell the difference any more. The packaging and the discourse have obscured the thing itself: the art. If the concept is valid and the political or philosophical slant is on-target, the curators drag out the old banners and the crowds cheer. As "The Decade Show" and the Springfield survey attest, the most serious makers of new work are often unfairly ignored in all the clamor and confusion.

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BERT CARDULLO

Lovers and Other Strangers

PEDRO ALMODÓVAR IS SURELY THE MOST OVERRATED European director now at work.[1] Perhaps this is because he's from Spain, which until the death of Franco censored film to such an extent that directors could express "subversive" ideas only in the form of elaborately veiled metaphors, thus making their films nearly impenetrable to a wide foreign audience—that is, if they were lucky enough to reach one. Well, there's nothing impenetrable, or even subtle, about Almodóvar's work: he's transparent, tasteless, *and* Spanish, and therefore a quick sell to audiences who like their trash dressed up in European artiness, in pseudo-daring, the more exotic the better. In his case, complete freedom of artistic expression has only revealed how little art he has to express. Almodóvar's films (all with screenplays by him) contain sex without being about sex, let alone passion; contain neurotic urbanites—mainly women—without exploring their neuroses; and contain comedy not because they spring from a comic vision, from comic seriousness, but because they are the product of an impoverished imagination, which will always resort to the cheap or sensational laugh rather than confront the artistic possibilities of its own creation.

About Almodóvar's eighth and latest film, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, I can only say that it's as facile and tedious as his other films to reach these shores (*Dark Habits* [1984], *Matador* [1986], and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* [1988] among them). We're in Madrid once again, where an ex-mental patient cum stud-and-thief kidnaps a porno star cum junkie with whom he's infatuated, and, guess what, she winds up falling in love with him and he finds his way back to sanity. (William Wyler did a much better job with an unhappy version of this story in *The Collector* [1965], partly because he had the advantage of inheriting from John Fowles, the author of the novel, two characters firmly separated by social class and education.) He's

[1] Woody Allen is the most overrated American director. His latest film, the highly praised *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, is rivalled only by Paul Mazursky's *Enemies: A Love Story* for the sheer banality of its central idea. Woody seems only recently to have discovered that, yes, evil does often go unpunished in this world and, yes again, one person's love for another can prove to be utterly unfathomable; while Paul appears only lately to have learned (via Isaac Bashevis Singer, on whose novel *Enemies* is based) that, indeed, even Holocaust survivors are not perfect—like the rest of us, they live, they love, they lust, they err. Welcome to the twentieth century, boys.

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sensitive and clever, of course, and naturally she's talented in addition to being beautiful. They'll marry and as a result he'll finally have the family that, as an orphan, he has always been denied. Or, literally bound during the period of her kidnapping, the actress will now consent to being figuratively bound to her former captor. Throw in some gratuitous symbolism, an aging horror-film director who lusts after the porno star (lots of room for cinematic self-reference here), a self-consciously removed camera, and a designer color scheme, familiar from Almodóvar's past films, that says more about his art director's taste than it does about either his characters or the world they inhabit, and you have a film that only a postmodernist could love.

Almodóvar, who affectedly prefers to be known by the single surname at this early stage in his career, has already been compared to Luis Buñuel, but the comparison should stop at their country of origin. Working mainly in France and Mexico, Buñuel certainly made his share of bad films, but at his best, in such films as *L'Age d'Or* (1930), *Viridiana* (1961), and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), he could do what Almodóvar cannot: combine surreal fantasy, religious irreverence, sexual commentary, and social criticism in meaningful, passionate ways. Almodóvar's is a camp sensibility out to do little more than express its own sense of homosexual disenfranchisement in a predominantly heterosexual world, and in this sense his films are not-so-elaborately veiled metaphors that, unlike their metaphorical counterparts made during Franco's reign, are guilty of moral dishonesty. He has said that he speaks for all the disenfranchised, especially women, but in reality he speaks only for himself and his camp followers. That is why his films have the flat, hysterical feel of all propaganda.

For sheer vulgarity, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* is matched only by the Englishman Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, a mindless orgy of unspeakable brutality purportedly modeled after Jacobean tragedy. Greenaway's film—about a vengeful gangster posing as a respectable businessman who is cuckolded by his frustrated and abused wife—has excess in common with Jacobean tragedy, but nothing else. Unlike his earlier, pointed *Draughtsman's Contract* (his second full-length film, made in 1982 and preceded by *The Falls* [1980] as well as numerous shorts), which elegantly explored the dark side of Restoration comedy, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* has no idea at its heart, no premise that would justify its visual and corporeal excess. (And those who call it a black comedy forget that such comedy directs its blackness at a target; Greenaway's film is simply black, towards nothing in particular, despite the director's claim that its target is the savage gluttony of Thatcherite England, and for this reason its humor never transcends the feeble.[2])

[2] *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* is similar in this respect to Marco Ferreri's

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It is an exercise in obscene display that inspired more loathing in me than any film in recent memory. One line, spoken by the wife after the murder of her lover by her husband's thugs, epitomizes the depraved tone of this movie. "Cook Michael for me," she several times entreats the chef of the posh restaurant where she, her husband, and his gang regularly dine (if that is the word); her intention is to serve her lover's body—penis first—to her husband as a main course. (I guess that Greenaway has been reading, if not digesting, Senecan as well as Jacobean tragedy.) Unfortunately, she's not joking, and neither is Greenaway's film. It serves up its cardboard characters and their meaningless violence in all seriousness.

In between *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, Greenaway wrote and directed three other feature films: *A Zed and Two Naughts* (1985), *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), and *Drowning by Numbers* (1988). I got to see *The Belly of an Architect* recently, and it requires no comment other than that it confirms a fear I had about Greenaway from the start: that his painterly eye (he is a painter as well as a filmmaker), his eye for geometric form, visual detail, and physical grouping—aided and abetted by the cinematography of Sacha Vierny (best known for his work with Alain Resnais, who, at his worst, is guilty of the same allegorical attitudinizing as Greenaway)—might overtake his narrative and thematic sense. Pictures alone *don't* tell a story, nor do pictures within a picture—in the case of *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, a full-scale replica of Frans Hals's *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Militia* (1616) that hangs across the back wall of the restaurant "Le Hollandais," a painting whose celebration of the Civic Guard of Haarlem, of the strength and optimism of the citizen-soldiers who established the new Dutch Republic (Hals created a number of life-size group portraits of Civic Guards), is meant to contrast with the "celebration" of greed, lust, and tyranny that occurs down on the floor; and in the case of *The Belly of an Architect*, the drawings of the eighteenth-century French architect Etienne-Louis Boullée, which in their order, clarity, and simplicity are intended to clash with the mess an Amercan architect and his young wife are making of their lives. Obviously, good films could not exist without good visuals, but good visuals are not enough by themselves, at least not in fiction films: they must be complemented by a good script—that is, by incisive narrative direction, subtle thematic point, and intelligent characterization. The bloated *Belly of an Architect*, like *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, has none of these. If Peter Greenaway can no longer balance his painterly

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La Grande Bouffe (1973), about four middle-aged men who retreat to a walled villa in the heart of Paris in order literally to eat, and copulate, themselves to death over 130 wearisome minutes of screen time.

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impulses with his screenwriting obligations, then he ought simply to engage a scenarist with whom he could profitably collaborate.

The director Norman René probably thought that the right scenarist for his first film was naturally Craig Lucas, the playwright with whom he had previously collaborated in the theater. But Lucas isn't a writer, he's a word processor, and the process he's serving in *Longtime Companion* is sympathy for homosexuals afflicted with AIDS. Hence such mawkish lines as "David [who has died of AIDS] taught me that life is only what you put into it" and "What do you think happens when we die?"; and such mawkish scenes as one on Fire Island where two homosexuals frolicking in the dunes stop to appreciate two deer frolicking in the dunes, and another on the beach at the end where the survivors mingle with the dead in a fantastic re-creation of the Edenic bliss of gay life before AIDS. Lucas makes fun of the writing for soap operas at several points in this film, but his writing is little better—indeed, it's worse because it's finally nothing more than propaganda. *Longtime Companion* isn't about the causers of AIDS—homosexual males who promiscuously engaged in anal and oral intercourse from, say, 1969 (the year of the Stonewall Riot in Greenwich Village, whose spawning of the gay-liberation movement more or less coincided with the onset of the sexual revolution in this country, and also the year *The Boys in the Band*, *Longtime Companion*'s equally embarrassing generic predecessor, was filmed from Mart Crowley's play) to 1981, when the *New York Times* first called attention to the deadly cancer infecting the gay population. It's about longtime, faithful companions—three loving, affluent, drug-free (and white) homosexual couples and the heterosexual woman who befriends them to such an extent that we wonder when she finds time for her own boyfriend, or what he thinks about her need for such male companionship. In other words, *Longtime Companion* is about the kind of homosexual least likely to be plagued by AIDS and most likely to garner the sympathy (and dollars) of the heterosexual filmgoing public. The only "single" homosexual male among the main characters is the first to die of AIDS, in 1983, but we never see him engaged in the promiscuity that has killed him; by contrast, we see two of the three couples—the two youngest, most handsome, least effeminate—engaged in highly romantic foreplay in the privacy of their chic Manhattan apartments. On the evidence of this film, one would never know that anonymous, bathhouse sex was once a staple of gay life in major American cities.

None of the above should be construed as an argument against homosexuality; the argument is against homosexual *or* heterosexual promiscuity, on biological grounds rather than moral ones: the human body just doesn't seem geared, over the long haul, to serve multiple sex partners. Special pleaders for AIDS sufferers conveniently forget that syphilis was once a big killer of *straight* (promiscuous) males. Did those males conduct nationwide campaigns in de-

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mand of the public's sympathy and research support? No, probably because they never conceived of themselves as a "minority," and probably also because they realized, consciously or not, that they were largely responsible for their own condition. So too are homosexuals responsible for theirs, and *Longtime Companion* is dishonest not to face this truth. Again, that's not at all to say that AIDS research shouldn't be funded or should be underfunded; it is to say, however, that homosexuals must confront the implications of their former (and in some quarters continuing) "lifestyle," which, if resumed after a cure for AIDS is discovered, could lead to another outbreak of the disease (the mutant nature of the AIDS virus is precisely what presently keeps scientists from developing a vaccine for it). This issue is raised only once in the film—significantly, just before the final imaginary reunion (after which the one surviving couple and their heterosexual confidante walk bravely off into the sunset!). And it's dismissed as something homosexuals are tired of hearing about and will address only when they're good and ready, without any interference from the "straight" population. Yet it's this same "straight" population on whose tax dollars homosexuals are depending to fund the research that will lead to a cure for AIDS. Had *Longtime Companion* told the truth about AIDS, the whole truth, it would have been a brave, compassionate film. As it stands, it's a pathetic attempt not only to pander to homosexuals' wishful image of themselves as a superior, victimized minority, but also to inspire guilt in the heterosexual majority for ever having dared to discriminate against men so intelligent, so witty, so urbane, so *sensitive*.

Normally, I wouldn't give a film so lacking in artistic merit so much space, but I felt I had to counter some of the nonsense being written about it by New York critics who should know better. *Longtime Companion* doesn't even have particularly good continuity as it attempts to trace the lives of its principal characters from July 1981 to July 1989: a number of scenes are too short (probably because the film was originally intended for television, where it will eventually be aired) and thus make the film appear coyly elliptical; Paul's story gets slighted after he is hospitalized for AIDS (his lover is Howard, the one who brags to a benefit audience, "I'm an actor and I have AIDS"); and, sorry to say, I couldn't tell some of those stereotypically handsome young gays apart! Worst of all, sound levels vary too much from indoors to outdoors—at times, I could barely tell what was being said out there by the beach. What I liked best about *Longtime Companion* was its visual style: the muted, sometimes even chilling colors of Tony Jannelli's cinematographic palette; and Norman René's habit, probably a carry-over from his work in the theater, of holding the camera on a scene and letting the actors—among whom Bruce Davison and Mark Lamos (himself a theater director of some repute), as the oldest of the couples, stand out—make the most of it, then and there, without the mixed blessing of fussy editing and moving music. But

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actors and director alike are ill-served by Craig Lucas' cloying, insipid script, which brings us back to the fact that a good screenplay is the *sine qua non* of a good feature film. To speak of good acting, discreet directing, and felicitous cinematography in a poorly scripted film is to indulge oneself in a sensuousness of pure form that is alien to narrative art.

Like Norman René, Jim Sheridan is a theater director making his film début, but unlike *Longtime Companion*, Sheridan's *My Left Foot* has a pretty good script, adapted by him and Shane Connaughton from the autobiography of the same name by Christy Brown, a Dubliner afflicted with cerebral palsy who nonetheless became a writer and painter through the use of the only part of his body over which his brain had control—his left foot. The drama in this story is obvious, and the filmmakers make the most of it—sometimes too much. Born in 1932, Christy was one of thirteen children in the family of Paddy and Bridget Brown (who bore a total of twenty-two children, nine of whom died in utero or in infancy). His parents thought that he was mentally as well as physically defective, but actually Christy belonged to the athethoid group of cerebral palsy victims, those whose mental capacity is essentially normal. His family's discovery of that capacity comprises the main drama early in the film, which is told in flashback from the day of Christy's birth to the day of a reception in his honor upon the publication of his autobiography (1954).

At this reception, which frames the film, a nurse named Mary Carr attends to Christy before he is called onstage, and it is her reading of the book *My Left Foot* while he dozes or drinks (a bit of a tippler our Christy is) that triggers the flashbacks. From time to time the film returns to the present, in which a drama of courtship between Christy and Mary (whom he married in 1972) complements the various dramas of the past. These include, in addition to the revelation of Christy's intelligence, the large family's struggle to live on a bricklayer's meager salary and to live with his violent temper; Christy's extreme attachment to his mother balanced against her obligations to the rest of her children, especially the newborn; Christy's awakening feelings for the opposite sex, which lead to his love for, and bitterly contested rejection by, his already affianced speech therapist, Dr. Eileen Cole (a fictional composite, for the sake of economy, of three real persons: the nursing student Katriona Delahunt, Dr. Robert Collis, and Dr. Patricia Sheehan, all of whom played significant roles in Christy's development); his growing need for his own wheelchair to replace the crude cart in which he gets trundled about, as well as his growing need for private space in which to paint—which he begins to do at about the age of eleven—to listen to classical music, and to write, which he begins to do at eighteen, first by dictating to his brother Eamonn, then by tapping out the words on his own typewriter with the toes of his left foot; and his mother's concern at her son's increasing independence from her, both through his improved

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speech (at one time she was the only one who could understand him) and through his artistic pursuits, as well as her concern at his emotional involvement with Eileen Cole ("A broken body's nothing to a broken heart," she says in one of the film's finer lines, which is followed shortly thereafter by her lament that "there's too much hope in his voice [when he speaks of or to Eileen]").

My Left Foot is Christy's story, but it's also the story of his family's struggle to survive, which makes his survival and self-fulfillment all the more remarkable. Conversely, one could argue even more persuasively that, in his angry persistence, he's no different from any other Brown, and that such persistence is simultaneously an inherited and a learned response to a hostile working-class environment. In other words, Christy becomes who he is *because* of his surroundings rather than in spite of them, and because of the love (but rarely the indulgence) of a family that refused to place him in a state-run home. *My Left Foot* is thus no mere sentimental or inspirational affirmation of the indomitable human spirit, no propaganda piece on behalf of the disabled. We're not asked first to pity Christy for his disability, then to applaud him for his triumph over it and over the evils of discrimination; rather, we're asked to observe how well in fact he fits into his society and how that society does its best to help him flourish. Christy Brown is a human being who curses, lusts, drinks, rages, and finally creates, not a saint or hero all of whose problems can be traced not only to indifferent Nature but to each of her uncaring inhabitants as well.

Is Christy's story meant to stand for something beyond itself, to be a metaphor for the human condition in the way that John Merrick's and Kaspar Hauser's stories were metaphors, respectively, in the plays *The Elephant Man* (1979, by Bernard Pomerance, adapted to film in 1980 by David Lynch) and *Kaspar* (1968, by Peter Handke, adapted to film in 1974 by Werner Herzog)? No, I don't think so, although the filmmakers could have made some comment on the arbitrariness of human fate by paralleling Christy's arbitrary demise—he choked to death on his Christmas dinner in 1981, at the age of forty-nine—with his arbitrary deformity. They were probably wise to exclude Christy's death from the film, however, just as they were wise to end it with the publication of his autobiography. What's important in his story is not life's arbitrariness but the power of human beings to overcome that arbitrariness, however briefly. What's important about Christy's artistic output is less the quality of it than the fact of it: in addition to numerous paintings (of which I could find no documentary or critical record[3]) and an autobiography, he produced four novels and three books of poetry (together they make up the *Collected Poems* [1982]).

[3] The rough-hewn yet striking canvases displayed in the film must have been painted by someone else, since at least three of them feature the actors who play Christy's mother, father, and speech therapist: Brenda Fricker, Ray McAnally, and Fiona Shaw.

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I've sampled the fiction and the poetry, and it's my critic's duty to report that they're not very good. But no matter: Christy's art was in his life, and it's the life that the filmmakers give us, devoid of the sentimentality and affectation to be found in the novels and poems. Well, mostly devoid: I could have done without the Hollywood-style bar fight after Paddy Brown's funeral (he dies of a heart attack from almost single-handedly building Christy a kind of artist's cottage in the backyard of their home); without the shots of the painting of Jesus and the painting of the Madonna and child, stared at by a Christy who lies awake amidst the multiple sleeping bodies of his siblings as his staunchly Catholic parents audibly beget yet another child in the next room; without the low-angle long shot of Mary Carr during her first date with Christy, her arms raised high next to a church steeple in the countryside overlooking Dublin; and without the counterproductive freeze frame on Mary and Christy drinking champagne at the end.

As many critics have already pointed out, the performances in *My Left Foot* are superb, especially those of Hugh O'Conor as the boy Christy, Daniel Day-Lewis as Christy the young man, Brenda Fricker as Bridget Brown, and Ray McAnally as Paddy Brown. Let me concentrate here briefly on Day-Lewis, who has shown remarkable range in such films as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), *A Room with a View* (1986), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), and now *My Left Foot*. To get an idea of the difficulty of playing the mature Christy—of creating his complex character at the same time as one acts his extraordinary physical and oral affliction—think how much easier it would be by comparison to play John Merrick, the Elephant Man, whose deformed appearance and distorted speech were not naturalistically reproduced either onstage or on film; or think how much easier still it would be to play *Rain Man*'s Raymond Babbitt, whose mental defect in essence *is* his character. Dustin Hoffman was widely praised in early 1989 for his depiction of the autistic Raymond, but it seemed to me that his job was fairly simple: he had only to simulate or replicate the external being of a man who possessed virtually no interior life. Christy Brown's interior life, by contrast, is his reason for being, for continuing to live, and it was Day-Lewis' job to make that life shine through an intractable body, a body that a lesser actor might have made the heart-tugging star of the show.

His chief weapons, as you might guess, are his eyes; his chief ammunition, his sterling actor's ability to imagine the heart and mind of a man who is ever crying out for release from the prison-house of his flesh; his chief foil, the cinematography of Jack Conroy (never mentioned in the reviews I've read), which performs the neat trick of lighting the Browns' proletarian milieu at the same time that it captures the *absence* of light from this milieu, from its drab interiors and its livid exteriors, its crowded, low-ceilinged rooms and its narrow, skyless streets. Daniel Day-Lewis' light burns inside, and we see it in the film's first shot when, after opening in medium close-up

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on a typewriter and watching Christy's left foot glide into the frame to place a needle on a record, the camera travels up to his face, which seems to glare out from the surrounding semidarkness as an aria from *Così fan tutte* plays. The music and the typewriter, the delicately moving foot and the piercing eyes, the tightness of the shot and the dimness of the light—these things are a kind of summation and conclusion of the drama to come, in a single long take intensified by the sound of Christy's nervous breathing. With the help of Jack Conroy, Jim Sheridan has created a masterful first image; with the help of Daniel Day-Lewis, he has illuminated the essence of Christy Brown's character: the footloose camera stares at Christy, and he stares defiantly back.

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HAROLD FROMM

Stephen Toulmin's Postmodernism

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL *idées reçues* in contemporary historiography, philosophy, and literary theory is that there is no really retrievable past, that the "past" is a story made up in the present in accord with the desires and needs of the story-teller and his society. While a case is usually conceded for the existence of "facts" (e.g., the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945), the significance we attempt to derive from facts by means of interpretation is little more than a narrative construct. Since meaning is never a datum, the "reason" behind historical events—the connection between Event A and Event B—is not simply "there" waiting to be caught. Rather, it is something entirely made (or "made up") that will be accepted or rejected according to how well it satisfies the needs of current society. One sees this concept operating across a wide spectrum of contemporary disciplines. In psychoanalysis, for instance, it generates the thesis that the explanation of a dream, action, or compulsion becomes true or correct because it is emotionally acceptable to the patient, a story he is willing to buy, one that "cures" him of his problem. In philosophy, Richard Rorty's view that no foundations of knowledge (no "epistemology") can ever be self-validating (which results in an infinite regress that leaves all systems foundationless) has led him to the pragmatic conclusion that philosophic positions are simply part of the "conversation of mankind," episodes in an ongoing story that is accepted or rejected because it makes things hang together better than another story. The New Historicism dominating various wings of literary theory and historiography is a polemical, political, reconstructivism that sometimes claims to find the hidden operations of power behind belief systems of the past, but frequently admits that what is actually "found" is a construct built from present political needs. In all of these methodologies, the buzzword is "narrative," the art of telling a good story. And with "rhetoric" newly back in favor in its old honorific Aristotelian sense, it becomes possible to look upon contemporary interpretation as the act of creating a usable past through the arts of persuasion, in order to satisfy the desires of the present.

All of this plausible—if in some quarters overstated—background is by way of identifying the philosophic infrastructure of Stephen

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Toulmin's new book, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*,[1] which provides us with a virtuoso example of mythmaking in action, a mythmaking whose aim is to show us how we became the people we are today, namely The Postmoderns, and—very importantly—why being Postmodern is a Good Thing. If, according to an exploded old narrative, man's sinfulness could once be explained by our mythic parents' bad choice in the primeval Garden, what we now learn from this new and ingenious narrative by a twentieth-century polymath is how Western man's need for Postmodernness can be explained in terms of a seventeenth-century bad choice in the fabrication of "modernity."

Toulmin's story—which he himself describes as a narrative—aims to reveal the hidden agenda of science, religion, and social relations that served as the motor for almost four centuries of modernity, culminating in the backlash of the past twenty or thirty years that we now call Postmodernism:

> This book chronicles a change of mind. The discoveries it reports are as much personal as scholarly. After training in mathematics and physics in the late 1930s and early '40s, I was introduced to philosophy at Cambridge after World War II, and learned to see Modern Science—the intellectual movement whose first giant was Isaac Newton—and Modern Philosophy—the method of reflection initiated by Descartes—as twin founding pillars of modern thought, and prime illustrations of the strict "rationality" on which the modern era has prided itself.

But Toulmin gradually found himself rejecting the conventionally assigned mid-seventeenth-century birthdate of the modern world, with Descartes and Newton at its rational center and religious freedom and tolerance as one of its major concomitants, in favor of an earlier genesis of modernity in the sixteenth-century Humanism of Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne and Shakespeare. Building his case almost entirely on readings of a skeptical Montaigne, he sees this Humanism as tolerant of diversity, complexity, and ambiguity; accepting of the body and its desires as well as their connection with the life of the mind; concerned with the particular context of life and history; dedicated to rhetoric and the spoken word as well as to practical (rather than formal) logic; and committed to the plasticity of "case-ethics" rather than eternal verities about human morals and behavior. Implicated in the veins and fluids of fleshly humanity, these humanists dwelt in a sensuous world of the timely, the local, the particular, and the oral.

[1] COSMOPOLIS: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity, by *Stephen Toulmin*. The Free Press. $22.95.

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For Toulmin, then, the pressing question is how did it come about that the agenda of these early moderns—modern because of their severance from "medievalism"—was bypassed in favor of the rather puritanical rationalist program of the physical sciences, which Toulmin sees as exercising a hegemony over virtually all aspects of intellectual and social life in the West from the early seventeenth-century until around 1960? His reply, which forms the book's main thesis, is that the assassination of the liberal, Montaignesque, Henry of Navarre in 1610 led to the Thirty Years War, a war of religious fanaticism in sharp contradistinction to the "urbane and relaxed tolerance" that characterized the era of Henry's reign. "The intellectual debate between Protestant Reformers and their Counter-Reformation opponents had collapsed, and there was no alternative to the sword and the torch. Yet, the more brutal the warfare became, the more firmly convinced the proponents of each religious system were that their doctrines *must be* proved correct."

This "Quest for Certainty" (to use Toulmin's phrase from John Dewey) replaced the skepticism and tolerance of the humanists with a need for Cartesian and Newtonian—ultimately Platonic—rationalism, based on secular, abstract, mathematically founded, clear and distinct ideas available to all men at all times, regardless of their particular local beliefs or historical situations. The seventeenth-century philosophers and scientists reserved the term "rationality" for "the theoretical arguments that achieve a quasi-geometrical certainty or necessity: for them, theoretical physics was thus a field for rational study and debate, in a way that ethics and law were not. Instead of pursuing a concern with 'reasonable' procedures of all kinds, Descartes and his successors hoped eventually to bring all subjects into the ambit of some formal theory," and in doing so they narrowed the sense of "rationality" into something that disdained the situatedness of mere flesh.

The result was a system of knowledge that existed in a decontextualized mental realm set off from daily life and the vagaries of the body and emotions. This entailed a timeless morality as well—that man was a "rational animal" whose body was just a necessary evil for supporting a mind and whose soul had affinities with eternity. Toulmin attempts to show how the once popular notion of "cosmopolis"—that the earth and its institutions are part of a universal order and reason—was rescued from a rapid decline after the New Science of Galileo and Copernicus damaged its credibility, a rescue made possible by the innovative mathematical foundations bestowed upon it by Descartes and Newton. This revival, he argues, ultimately underwrote the spread of nation-states headed by kings with subjects who saw themselves as earthly counterparts of the solar system and its hierarchy of planets. In such a system, everything kept (or was forced to keep) to its proper orbit through subjection to rational (i.e. mathematical) cosmic forces, producing along the way the hierarchy

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of social classes with its habits of repressive "respectability," as well as certain basic agreements about the foundations of religious belief that served as a quietus after a violent religious war. In place of the spoken, the particular, the timely, and the local, what came to be valued were the written, the general (don't count the streaks on the tulip, Dr. Johnson advised Rasselas), the universal, and the eternal.

After establishing his thesis that this second, rationalist wave of Renaissance thought supplanted an earlier, Montaignesque wave of humanist skepticism as the modernist project, Toulmin reminds us that today all systems of thought are regarded as only the products of people living at a certain time in a certain place, that nothing is timeless, universal, or eternal, and that—far from being a voice from the cosmos—scientific modernity had its own hidden agenda. The decontextualized and "eternal" stance of Cartesian rationalism was ultimately "a smart political move," itself historically motivated not only by nationalist requirements for religious peace and social control but also by Descartes' own personal need to supplant religious factionalism with undisputable verities.

Although he does not have much to say about the eighteenth century, Toulmin does point out that the French Encyclopedists endorsed the Cartesian-Newtonian principles of cosmopolis while turning them against the absolutism of the Bourbon monarchy (in the interests of constitutional society). Then, when the dominance of rationalism itself began to weaken in the nineteenth century, the destabilization of Europe during the first half of the twentieth century (as a result of two world wars) caused a resurgence of decontextualized rationalism. Toulmin aptly illustrates the aesthetic effects of this revival in twelve-tone music, Miesian geometrical architecture, and abstractionism in the visual arts—all of which were movements away from the sensuous, the particular, the local, and the timely. By the 1960s, however, an irreversible breakup of almost 400 years of rational modernity was set in train, resulting in a transformation of contemporary life, sexually, esthetically, morally, ecologically, nationally, internationally.

The changes have been radical: the sciences' vaunted objectivity is now taken with more than a grain of salt, and their personal, social, sexual, and institutional imperatives are widely acknowledged—a significant offshoot of contemporary psychology, which has destroyed the belief that the physical and the mental are entirely separate realms and that there is such a thing as "pure reason." Nature as a fixed, eternal, mathematically coherent system has given way to a nature with a history extending back billions of years more than Scripture allowed, while the insight that man can actually destroy nature has produced today's burgeoning sciences of ecology. All the arts, including architecture, have returned to a particularity and sensuousness of a sort that had been repudiated by the canons of both the Enlightenment and twentieth-century modernism, which treated philosophy

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and literature as timeless conversations between disembodied great minds. The Quest for Certainty has given way to the Uncertainty Principle, and the doctrines of Aristotelian rhetoric are even being applied now to the language of science, which some thinkers see as just another branch of rhetoric. Indeed, for Richard Rorty it is the arts, not philosophy or science, that employ the language most compatible with the ungraspable fluidity of reality.

Since Toulmin's conclusion is that the hidden agenda of modernity worked to strengthen nation-states, to favor the growth of the "upper" classes, and to restrict the body in the interests of politics and economics (restrictions made possible by the invention of "traditional values" as a repressive mythology), it comes as no surprise that he takes much pleasure in the dismantling of its scaffolding. "The inhibitions from which Freud sought to liberate people at the end of the 19th century were not immemorial, or age-old," but sprang from the requirements of class-based nation-states, which depended upon a monolithic and pseudo-eternal rather than a case-oriented morality. Postmodernism, on the other hand, more in sympathy with Aristotelian skepticism and pragmatism, looks to Toulmin like a long overdue reappropriation of the sixteenth-century Humanism he commends as the authentic voice of modernity. In sum, Toulmin's own agenda involves "a reintegration of humanity with nature, a restoration of respect for Eros and the emotions, for effective transnational institutions, a relaxation of the traditional antagonism of classes, races and genders, an acceptance of pluralism in the sciences, and a final renunciation of philosophical foundationalism and the Quest for Certainty."

Given Toulmin's interest in hidden agendas and his endorsement of narrativity as today's version of "truth," it would require extraordinary tact and self-control to avoid looking into his own procedures and programs with a critical eye. Lacking such pretensions, I must first say that *Cosmopolis* is a performance of great skill, erudition, and plain-spokenness. As an example of the humanist virtues Toulmin so highly prizes, it could hardly fail to influence perceptions even if one repudiates its theses, for it tells a very engaging story indeed. Unlike so many of his banner-waving academic colleagues, Toulmin (like his humanists) *can* entertain complexity, skepticism, and ambiguity, so he is impelled to ask whether "we can regain the humane wisdom of the Renaissance, without in turn losing the advantages we won during the three hundred years in which intellectual life was dominated by Cartesian philosophy and the exact sciences."

Toulmin's own rhetorical strategies are only partially effective, however, because his principal device—repetition—is employed beyond anything I have encountered in many years. By means of incremental summary and resummary in every chapter, he restates all of the book's major ideas over and over again. This has the effect of making the central theses seem almost like truisms one has heard

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from other sources, even though one may in fact be hearing them for the first time here. Yet while they grow more and more familiar, like answers in a catechism, the claims do not grow more and more convincing, because (among other reasons) they are based on too few supportive examples. Toulmin's picture of sixteenth-century Humanism is built up almost entirely from Montaigne alone—mostly, in fact, from "An Apology of Raymond Sebond"—and this does not turn out to be sufficient evidence to account for a whole era's episteme. And his claims for sixteenth-century "reasonableness," tolerance, and intellectual modesty seem highly exaggerated. His treatment of the abandonment of this Humanism after the assassination of Henry of Navarre and the Thirty Years War rests heavily on a few scattered bits of information, such as an anonymous poem that *may be* by Descartes. Moreover, Toulmin's characterization of scientific rationalism derives almost exclusively from a handful of fairly well-known passages from Descartes and Newton, and though there are few figures who loom as large as they, constant repetition of their key doctrines does not seem enough to explain almost four centuries of Western civilization, despite the richly stocked vials and alembics of Toulmin's intellectual laboratory. As the argument progresses, one becomes increasingly aware that this is a mythology in the making, a narrative, if you will, that is being engineered to provide the groundwork for an explanatory "Apology" for Postmodernism.

On the other hand, if Toulmin's mythology is not convincing, it would be going too far to say it is completely *un*convincing. For once you accept the tenet that narrativity has in large measure replaced "truth" in the Interpretation of Reality (a Rortian position that does not make me unhappy), the problem with Toulmin's narrative begins to seem more like a limitation of his rhetoric (in the broad Aristotelian sense) than anything else. If interpretations, after all, are not either true or false but, rather, either convincing or unconvincing, then the degree of readerly conviction achieved is a function of rhetorical skill. One feels inclined to say that brilliant as it may be, Toulmin's narrative is not quite brilliant enough to produce conviction, however engaging his story. It may very well exert a permanent hold on one's thinking about Western history, but it will do so without necessarily enforcing the belief that it is a "true" account. For a fully successful narrative *seems like truth* in a way that *Cosmopolis* does not.

Toulmin's description, however, of our intellectual life since 1945 is very persuasive. The move from "rationality" to practical "reasonableness"; the shift from the predominance of physics to greater roles for biology, medical technology, ecology; the transfer of interest from decontextualized literary studies ("New Criticism") to those incorporating biography, history, and psychology, as well as rhetoric and speech-act theory; the shake-ups in social classes, ethnicity, sexuality—all these have contributed to Postmodernism's very different feel. Whether this will lead to the "humane reasonableness" that Toulmin

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foresees is questionable, though less so are his predictions—which current events do seem to support—of the demise of "the intellectual autonomy of distinct sciences, a confident reliance on self-justifying technologies, and separate independent nation-states with unqualified sovereignties."

But what is finally perhaps the most striking feature of *Cosmopolis* is the way it suddenly seems to fall—even with its immense sophistication and introspection—into that most unexpected of genres, the countercultural utopia. It looks much like a very couth grandchild of Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, Norman Brown's *Life Against Death*, Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counterculture*, and Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*. Yet a great difference remains: the postwar revolution they yearned for has already come and gone. The revolution did not turn out exactly as they had hoped; and in some respects it went much further than they could have imagined, producing a drug culture and an anti-"rational" mentality that even they might find shocking. So that despite its own patently utopian elements, *Cosmopolis* is after all less a countercultural utopia than an historical narration of how we came out the other end, how we became Postmodern. Toulmin's distinctive contribution to this history is his assertion that it was not anything so limited as the Vietnam War or the Cold War that got us where we are. Rather, it was an extended epoch in Western development beginning almost four centuries earlier in the conflicts that generated the Thirty Years War. In eulogizing the humanist period that flourished briefly before rationalism took over, Toulmin displaces countercultural utopia into the past by means of yet one more golden-age mythology that invites skepticism. And intimating a future of "humane reasonableness," he retains, of course, some of the idealistic notions of a "greened" America that were always implicit in, say, Allen Ginsberg and Ken Kesey, as well as explicit in Roszak and Reich. What he has attempted to do, somehow, is to historicize and naturalize this mood of the sixties, to suggest that the human personality is always dual, never fully represented by either of its polarities. But in the elegiac tone of his book one senses that, whatever the reason, for him the pull toward body and earth is now pretty strong.

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CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK

Coping with the D-Word

I LIKE TWO OF BRIAN MCCREA'S EPIGRAPHS so well that I'm borrowing them to introduce the books under review. Garnered from late-night conversations in academic watering holes from Kalamazoo to Charlottesville, they say for McCrea what he's a bit too cagy to say for himself. "It seems to me that all this criticism and theory is just a way to keep a bunch of you white boys employed"—credited to someone identified as John "The Hawk" Smith in a tavern called the In Bounds. Dan Coyle, in the Handle Bar, went further: "What," he asked, "if all great literature actually were simple?"[1]

Such attitudes often seem the best way of coping with the d-word. Deconstruction has put a lot of us through a lot in the past twenty years: impatience, irritation, outrage, humiliation—not necessarily in that order. Who has *time* for it? We could be learning Greek, or Japanese. We could be reading *Clarissa* or *The Mahabharata* or *Invisible Man* or *Gravity's Rainbow*. We could be playing the piano or lifting weights. Perhaps if we hold our breaths it will go away? Vain hope, says McCrea; if it does, something equally entangling will take its place to keep the English department employed. Wishful thinking, says John Ellis: "Jacques Derrida continues to be cited more than any other theorist," and the books and articles keep coming.[2] George Watson provides the grumbling bass; argue a little, proclaim a lot; what we need is what we used to have: not undecidability, not the endless free play of interpretation, but certainty, the certainty of literature.[3]

It takes some courage to write about deconstruction. The texts are protected by their high difficulty. Who dares take them on? The very thought awakens the most crippling of fears, the fear of seeming stupid in public. When shall we be ready? When we have read *Of Grammatology*? And *Writing and Difference*? And *Blindness and Insight*? And Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Génerale*? John Ellis' short book has a bibliography of over a hundred items: primary texts, secondary

[1] ADDISON AND STEELE ARE DEAD: The English Department, Its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Criticism, by *Brian McCrea*. University of Delaware Press. $38.50.

[2] AGAINST DECONSTRUCTION, by *John M. Ellis*. Princeton University Press. $25.00; $9.95.

[3] THE CERTAINTY OF LITERATURE: Essays in Polemic, by *George Watson*. St. Martin's Press. $35.00.

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texts, texts upon texts. . . . So we begin. But the road is long and winding, it's easy to get lost, and from what we hear along the way, the sepulchre—isn't that the point?—is empty. Most of us keep going just long enough to pick up a few marketable relics, then turn back, irritable, snappish, and not feeling very proud of ourselves. People do not, in general, respond well to humiliation, and deconstruction has the power to threaten, not only our few remaining certainties, but our very ability to cope, with it or with anything else. We thought we could read, were in fact quite good at reading. If being good at reading weren't part of our identity, we wouldn't be worrying about deconstruction at all. Deconstruction's inaccessibility, its power to bewilder and intimidate, is central to its extraordinary influence.

These three books address that influence in three different ways. There is the way of indirection, not so much coping with deconstruction as sliding past it into the safety of paradox and the warmth of common experience. That's Professor McCrea's way: yearn your way back toward the old values, while preserving your sophistication by arguing that they are irrevocably past, that *Addison and Steele Are Dead.* George Watson's way is easier and more direct: assert the immemorial certainties, loud, clear, and familiar. Both ways depend on faith: that the yearning is more than mere nostalgia, that the values retain not merely their immemorial lustre but their power, that truth, as Blake said, can never be told so as to be understood and not be believed. The trouble with that, of course, is that it leaves the convinced preaching to each other. John Ellis has taken the harder way: to read the stuff, not just some of it, not just a lot of it, but read, read, read it all, so that he can identify the arguments, confront them, and answer them, so as to earn his right to his straightforward title: *Against Deconstruction.*

Still, Professor McCrea's indirection works better than one might think. His examination of the reputations of two writers once highly valued and valued no longer allows him to challenge a formidable array of idées reçues, most centrally the valorization of inaccessibility. Deconstruction is only the culmination of his broader subject: the sociology of that rather recent entity, the English department. He presents its 120-year history as one of increasing professionalization, and "all professional groups achieve autonomy by developing a special language and special techniques, by excluding the layman." Thus the English department needs inaccessibility, and for the past 50 years it has been increasingly successful in locating, valuing, and generating it.

McCrea enters his subject through his own field, the eighteenth century. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele wrote for a wide public, deliberately, regularly, and successfully. They reached it, in their own time and for 200 years thereafter. Ranked with Swift and Pope, their place on the syllabus seemed secure. Yet shortly after World War II,

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they died. They died not of sentimentality or of irrelevance, says McCrea, but of simplicity.

Swift and Pope, in contrast, are alive and well. They provide the English department with its professional necessities: ambiguity, irony, tricky and questionable personae. But what's to be done with writers who consider it "one of the great Beauties of Poetry, *to make hard things intelligible,* and to deliver what is abstruse of itself in *such easy language as may be understood by ordinary Readers,*" whose pride is to have "brought Philosophy out of the Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and in Coffee-Houses"? "English department critics," says McCrea, "can tolerate almost any bizarre morality. But they cannot and will not brook simplicity."

So deconstruction becomes the New Criticism's natural successor. "W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks play John the Baptist to the Christ that is the present generation of Yale critics." For Professor McCrea, "the great single defining quality" of modern and postmodern critics "is that they are academic critics." The canon is theirs, to create and uncreate. The ordinary Reader hasn't the status to challenge it. Freestanding men or women of letters hardly exist; today's Virginia Woolfs and Lytton Stracheys—even today's poets—all have academic appointments. No salvation outside the English Department. And in the English department, all too often the natural place of inscription is not in the mind of student or professor, to afford the old-fashioned satisfactions of profit and delight, but in the course syllabus. If it's not inscribed there it drops away.

Professor McCrea's privileged words include "availability," "clarity," "community," even "common sense," which he has the temerity to define as "the shared wisdom and experience" of the audience. Odd, that the very theories that proclaim themselves as revolutionary should exclude the commonalty of readers—and valorize a literature which guarantees a growing army of non-readers. "Why," he asks, "must we disvalue the techniques of clarity? Why should the definitions of writing offered by continental theorists— . . . definitions that celebrate those texts in which we cannot locate either an author or a signified—so fascinate and exercise us?"

And if we're speaking up for clarity and community, why stop there? Through Addison and Steele, Professor McCrea can insert something even more radical—insert it, or let it hover. He isn't about to come right out and argue against the bizarre moralities tolerated by his colleagues, but he'd at least like us to entertain the idea that literature deals centrally with moral value. His book is less a set of recommendations than of yearnings: after Addison and Steele, who could be philosophical and sentimental and sensible and moral in the language of coffee houses and tea-tables; after the great age of English professors like Wilbur Cross and William Lyon Phelps of Yale and Charles Townsend Copeland and Bliss Perry of Harvard and

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John Erskine of Columbia who "practice[d] no separate, special critical language," who like Addison and Steele sought a wide public and found it, who like Addison and Steele were popular and proud of it.

McCrea does more than yearn, however. His chapter on "the Generation of the '90s" is crammed with fascinating and unexpected facts about these teachers who engaged the world in a way that the professionalization of the English department has made impossible. No academic today is likely, like Wilbur Cross, to edit *The Yale Review* while serving as governor of Connecticut. None publishes, as Phelps did, in the *Rotarian*. Phelps got Gene Tunney to address his Shakespeare class. He tutored the sons of George Pullman. It's as if Lee Iacocca enlisted the educational services of Harold Bloom. If "the ultimate step in the aggrandizement of any professional group is for its members to get paid to talk about how they do what they do rather than doing it," these men were "preprofessionals." Their prime interest was in "'greatness,' not ambiguity or self-referentiality." And they were "committed to a public discussion of literature's moral value and its role in improving the human character."

That's what McCrea would really like to be committed to, though he won't quite say so. He cites Cleanth Brooks's fear of a criticism that would make poetry "significant merely as a political, moral, or religious instrument," highlighting the "merely," asking "what greater functions could poetry have?" He approves Wimsatt's admission that "what a critic or a teacher does with a poem is not, certainly, the main thing the poem is intended for or fit for." Nevertheless, Addison and Steele are dead, Stanley Fish is not Billy Phelps, nor is like to be. Though Professor McCrea would like to go for "the main thing" (I suspect that in his own teaching he does go for it), he bows to the sociohistorical determinism of his analysis. The English department is where "we live, move, have our beings, and collect our paychecks." Its endlessly proliferating subspecialties, its Durkheimian division of labor, afforded thousands of jobs that did not exist when Bliss Perry taught everything from Beowulf to Kipling. It has room for, indeed seeks, those formerly excluded in the glory days of public commitment—which were also the days of a white male Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony so complete that nobody even thought about it. The English department protects its members from "a heartless and increasingly nonliterary world as well as from competition with each other." But at a price. "It also limits what we can say"—and even more severely, to whom we say it.

Professor McCrea knows what his analysis tells him, and he also knows what he feels. He has as much trouble as the rest of us in bringing the two into harmony. Professionalization has benefited those of us who are professors, at the cost of depriving students, the public, even teachers, of things they want and need. But we can't do anything about it, and if we realize which side our bread is buttered

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on, we shouldn't even try—though of course (as his book testifies) some of us will anyway.

George Watson is considerably less equivocal, not wryly regretting the displacement of morality and truth, but riding to their rescue. He insists there's a place to stand among the shifting signifiers. "Literary knowledge," "can be as certain as any knowledge there is—as certain, for instance, as mathematics or the natural sciences." "The arts . . . offer indispensable knowledge" of the human world. "[H]umanism is true." Its "master idea of a humanity that is ultimately one above all differences of race, class or creed" is "a doctrine of hope" that leads out of Giant Despair's castle.

But what if the fine old words, the appeals to Erasmus and Shakespeare, no longer work, or work in reverse? Feisty young critics who write of Shakespeare's "complicity in the humanist enterprise," who hail "the demise of the transcendent bard," who find indeterminacy "exhilarating," can and do convert words like "universality" and "traditional" into class-bound, if not racist or sexist, epithets.[4] How will Watson answer Leah Marcus and all the others who have, as she says, "developed an appetite for dissonance, for an art which is multicentric, shifting, provisional"? Those of us who would like nothing better than a demonstration of "the certainty of literature" need something more efficacious than appeals to values already transvalued, tablets already broken in the exhilarating frolic of the free-playground.

Moreover, Professor Watson's arguments sometimes suggest that he has understood less than he has read. In order to show, for example, that our thinking is not socially conditioned he tells us we need to do no more than appeal to experience and observation. His own experience tells him that he "do[es] not in fact hold the ideology [he] was brought up in"; his observation tells him that neither did Karl Marx. But just because we don't believe all we were brought up to doesn't mean we can identify, understand, or avoid all the ways in which it permeates our assumptions about the world and how we know and speak it. Even another humanist might find this too easy an escape from some very powerful considerations of class- and gender-determined language.

But lest in our disappointment we conclude that such arguments give simplicity a bad name, Watson recuperates with an argument that's so simply obvious that to set it out in print is a bit like saying, in front of everybody, that the emperor has no clothes. If undecidability reigns, what guarantees the truth-claims of post-modern skepticism? "How can it claim such certainty, if all certainty is unjustified?" How indeed? Such arguments, he says, exempt themselves from their own skepticism, and "any self-exempting argument is self-refuting."

[4] Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley, California, 1988), p. 25.

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Or it ought to be. But what if they don't exempt themselves? Derrida and his epigones are not so stupid, and Professor Watson's assumption that they are doesn't improve our confidence in his ability to cope with their feints and parries. They are consistent enough to recognize the inconsistency of their position, and enjoy it. Pleasure in the self-destructing artifact, after all, characterizes the game; "self-canceling" is a feel-good adjective. The snake, however, having swallowed its own tail, does not disappear, or even fall silent. Only a traditionalist hopelessly mired in "logocentricism" would expect it to.

We need more firepower than Professor Watson provides if we are to take on what Geoffrey Hartman himself called the "boa-deconstructor." John Ellis' book is brief but rigorous. He doesn't share McCrea's nostalgia for a university in which literature could be read simply and truth didn't come framed in quotation marks. He sets no great store by common sense, and he is as committed to the value of complexity as any New Critic. He doesn't believe in the certainty of literature, either. For him truth is as dubious as it is for the next up-to-date academic; his preferred word is "plausibility." Plausibility comes in differing degrees, however, and he will not "be intimidated by the bugaboo of total objectivity" into failing to distinguish between them. He is quite able to say, and plausibly show, that deconstruction is undemonstrated, pretentious, and unoriginal, "a logic not well adapted to productive . . . thinking, but rather to creating its illusion." The sophistication of his epistemology puts him in a much stronger position than McCrea's muted appeal to the simple truths of home or barroom, or Watson's unreconstructed humanism.

This is the book you need if you've read some, even a lot of post-modern *écriture* and are hoping not to have to read any more. Professor Ellis teases out and submits to scrutiny the definitions that readers of the primary texts have such a hard time finding, let alone comprehending. Knowing how deeply meaning inheres in language, he is careful to guard against charges of distortion or inaccuracy by presenting them as far as possible in their original wording. His book can serve almost as an anthology, albeit a hostile one, of key deconstructive statements. When he examines "logocentrism," for instance, or "difference," he quotes solid chunks of *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*, "since it is important to make sure that what we are discussing is really Derrida and not a summary that may have changed his emphasis in small but significant ways." It is only after a point by point confrontation of such texts that he concludes that "Derrida's ideas on meaning and language do not achieve any real coherence or force." Discussing Derrida's influence on criticism he is equally careful to "make sure that any exposition is conducted only in the words of committed advocates." His conclusion is crisp: deconstruction's program for criticism is "vacuous in theory and counter-productive in practice." To discover discordant, even contradictory meanings in a text may very well be illuminating in a particular case,

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but not as "a universally applicable method." Similarly, "to oppose a particular tradition or viewpoint with a particular alternative program is to set out a real position; but to announce simply an indiscriminate and unspecified opposition to any tradition . . . is . . . only to gain rather too easily acquired feelings of iconoclastic superiority."

Ellis assembles a veritable thesaurus of revolutionary self-satisfaction. Deconstruction "performs an operation that is variously described as undermining, subverting, exposing, undoing, transgressing, or demystifying; and it performs that operation on something variously thought of as traditional ideas, traditional limits, traditional logic, authoritative readings, privileged readings, illusions of objectivity, mastery or consensus, the referential meaning of a text, or simply what the text asserts." It is "disturbing," "disruptive"; it "unmasks," "dismantles," "exposes"; better yet, for the elegantly irrelevant religious resonance, it is a "scandal." "But with these emotional gains come considerable intellectual losses." The politicized and highly moralistic vocabulary actually expresses nothing more radical than the idea that we should think for ourselves, "be wary of received opinion, . . . not accept traditional views unquestioningly, not . . . swallow the obvious without looking at subtleties that it may conceal." It's good enough advice, but it is "advice, not theory," and scarcely original.

Mine-laying and subversion, of course, are highly dramatic activities for normally sedentary academics. And the vocabulary is functional as well as fun. "Familiar positions may not seem so familiar" when cast "in new and strange terminology," and "obviously relevant scholarship may not seem so obviously relevant." Presenting an "attack on the reference theory of meaning" as "an attack on the 'metaphysics of presence,'" conveniently conceals the "otherwise embarrassing fact" that what is being said has been said before. The reference theory was rejected long since; "the metaphysics of presence" affords "at least a new set of words, if not ideas." Similarly, the idea that critics work within the biases of their temperaments and backgrounds sounds considerably more exotic when reexpressed in terms of "desire," "blindness," or "fatigue." Language and meaning, it seems, are not totally inseparable; "simple ideas are not incompatible with tortuous prose."

Of course when required to submit to demands of logic and clarity, deconstructionists have an answer. These are, after all, the very demands that they have revealed as the vaunt-couriers of logocentricity, of bourgeois hegemony and ethnocentrism. There's not much to be done about that. Ellis, at any rate, isn't giving up on clarity, and though he is enough of a professor to prefer complexity to simplicity, he also, like Joseph Addison, believes in the possibility of making "hard things intelligible." He is a welcome ally for those of us who do not thrill to the vocabulary—or the enterprise—of dismantlement, or find it (again I quote Professor Marcus) "enlivening to imagine an

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even more radical destabilization" of the literature in which we have lived and moved and had our being.

If we persist in yearning for truth and morality, however, we shall have to go elsewhere. "What if all great literature actually were simple?" Deconstructionists have no monopoly on paradox: what if it were simple and complex at the same time, complex because it's enwebbed in language, simple because it's about us? What if, in spite of the sophistications of epistemology, we went back to proving it on our pulses? Would that recover for us a world of shared value, of children and community and simple human decency? In a final confession of faith, McCrea finds such a world still stubbornly subsisting "outside professional scrutiny . . . in all its mystery and grace." English professors, to earn their bread, must shuttle "between home and work, between a world in which Derrida is wrong and a world in which Derrida is right, between a world in which signs convey truth and a world in which they only are parts of a game." But even deconstructionists "do not live as if all signs were empty," and certainly nobody else does. If that isn't a logical argument, at least it's clear, maybe even true. As Dostoevsky said, "most people, even the wicked, are very much more naive and simple than we suppose. And we ourselves are too."

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ROBERT McDOWELL

The Wilderness Surrounds the Word

WE HAVE HEARD A LOT LATELY about our growing up (and into) a new decade, the last of this century. It has made for good copy to admit that the rich got richer in the Reagan Eighties while America got poorer, that the Japanese and EEC rule the global economy while the U.S. is the world's largest debtor nation, that as a people we *were* too greedy, arrogant, and insensitive. As if to underline these revelations, we can recall that the eighties ended with the savings and loan fiasco and the banishment for life of Pete Rose, our national pastime's all-time leader in hits. And as we confess our sins, attempting to heal our national psyche and get on with it, we insist that we have learned our lessons well, that we'll be better now in the things we do. History shows us, however, that we are much more likely to get on with it by doing just what we did before.

The twenty-plus new books I considered for this chronicle convince me that the social patterns I have noted here greatly inform our poetry, too. If poetry represents its time, then we should not be surprised to discover that too much current work is unreadable (after all, under the Education President literacy has plummeted to a new low). Though the hype machines spew out abundant accolades and the good news that poetry has never been better, most of our poets appear to be in a bad way. The trouble is that in cynical, depressed, and bureaucratic America, they are as cynical, depressed, and bureaucratic as they have ever been. The atmosphere they labor in is highly subjective, and the chiseled lines of standards have been blurred beyond recognition. In a *feel-good* lark, many poets step up their assault on Parnassus by publishing more and more volumes of slovenly, empty-headed expression illuminating nothing at all.

Aiding and abetting this situation is the sorry state of criticism. Except for the efforts of some meritorious, isolated writers, most essays and reviews of contemporary poetry are composed by poets and academics (or poet-academics) whose work proves two things: they *can* regularly jockey their work into print, and they *cannot* write good verse or good prose. Small wonder, then, that most poetry commentaries resemble the emotionally charged, content-empty sound bites of recent political campaigns. Thus the Language Poets are nihilist bullies; the new narrative and new formalist poets are right-wingers; Midwest poets are hicks, California poets are radicals, academic poets are dullards; and *everybody*, depending on who is

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speaking, represents the true avant-garde. The type of mind that warms to such pronouncements also bought the message in 1988 that a presidential vote for the Democrats was a vote for Willie Horton. It is a mind that detests rational thought and argument, ignores history's lessons, and prefers a distracting ping-pong present where intellect is not taxed and ego is constantly stroked. Is it going too far to suggest that too many poets are quite at home in this landscape? I don't think so. Like most other people, after all, most poets want very much to belong. In that soupy, subjective Present where recognizable critical standards hardly exist, if at all, many poets have found it far too easy to hunker down with the witless beside sympathetic fires.

Of the five poets whose work I'll consider below, one writes out of an English tradition less confusing than our own; two Americans carry out quite different but equally successful attacks against the dullness of contemporary verse; two others represent, to varying degrees, the American status quo.

I can only compare the experience of reading *Yes, Let's: New and Selected Poems*[1] by Tom Disch, to witnessing a gorgeous fireworks display after a picnic and ballgame on a sultry summer evening. The author of five collections of short stories and eleven novels, one of our best science fiction writers and the theatre critic for *The Nation*, the versatile Disch writes poetry that is always surprising and frequently magnificent. Equally adept at writing in form and free verse, Disch is the rare contemporary poetry creature of consummate wit and social conscience. He has a genius for writing with incisive intelligence while conveying the innocence and amazement of a child. In "March," for example, the string of a kite becomes "a wedding ring / Unreeled to its full, true extent," and the wind's tug on it is "the first hint we have of the size / of the sky and our lives added up together." Or consider "The Childhood of Language," which favorably rivals Roethke's "Child On Top of a Greenhouse" and "My Papa's Waltz," or "The Goldberg Variations":

> When suddenly a tricycle got up
> with Christmas bells started bouncing down
> the stairs, and then with just a tremor
> of hesitation (think of the too-strenuous
> handshake of an aging banker) turned
> round the corner, to encounter its own
> image; so might a child in a hospital
> bed, leafing through old magazines,
> come upon a photo of his own face

[1] YES, LET'S: New and Selected Poems, by *Tom Disch*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $8.95p.

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in some ad for an obscure charity—
without astonishment, without feeling sad.

Here we have Disch's potent method in miniature as two wildly disparate scenes are effortlessly harnessed in one coherent vision of our emotional response to life's seemingly random energy. The poem provokes us all the more with its steely, open-ended conclusion.

But Disch's powers of provocation are not exclusively confined to the world of childhood. As his readers know, he is a masterful satirist and social critic. In the fourth section of his new sequence, "MCMLXXXIV," he savagely exposes the television news media's evasion and superficiality; "At the Grave of Amy Clampitt" releases plenty of air from an inflated reputation; "Working on a Tan" becomes a highly charged critique of ambition and America's sense of class, and "Tales of the Forebears" turns on the poet's own family with brutal honesty.

As well as poetry already cited, *Yes, Let's* contains deft dramatic monologues, devotional poems and poems of travel, poems of elevated diction and poems sprung from the language of the streets. Exploring diverse subjects through diverse methods, Tom Disch accomplishes just about everything we could wish for in a contemporary book of verse. Throughout, as in "Skydiver," Man, "the mighty copycat," is seen as a free-falling figure momentarily tethered to this earth by "the patient skill of seamstresses / Running immense lengths of nylon / Through their clamoring machines." Through the simple grace of others, we may hold on in spite of our discouraging flaws and embarrassments. This truth lies utterly beyond most American poets.

Many believe that Charles Causley is England's best living poet, and *Secret Destinations: Selected Poems 1977-1988*[2] will do nothing to diminish that claim. Gathering published and unpublished work written over an eleven-year period, this compressed volume presents poetry (plus a handful of scintillating translations from the German, French, and Spanish) in which *all* fat has been cut away. This alone sets Causley apart from most of his American peers, but on closer examination his personal history also serves as a confident refutation of the displacement and self-absorption that has characterized so much of American life and letters in this century since the fifties.

Except for six years of military service (including World War II), Causley has lived his entire life in the Cornish village of Launceston, supporting himself by working in a builder's office, an electrical supply company, and later as a teacher at the same school he attended as a boy. His first book, *Farewell Aggie Weston*, appeared in 1951. Drawing heavily on his wartime experience in these poems, Causley

[2] SECRET DESTINATIONS: Selected Poems 1977-1988, by *Charles Causley*. David R. Godine. $9.95p.

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confidently tilled the ground (the ballad, the character study, meditations on travel, faith, the consequences of war) he would work repeatedly in successive volumes.

In the new book, these distilled life-long preparations, plantings, and harvests take the shape of one of the most moving verse documents of the modern world's fallen Man we can lay claim to. "My Enemy" recalls grade school torments inflicted by the pork butcher's son. "Sphinx-faced, his cheeks the colour of lard, the eyes / Revolver-blue," he would "punch out a tune across my harp of ribs." Decades later, the backwards-looking poet comes to a wise, unexpected conclusion: "Which one of us is which hard to define / For children in the butcher's class, and mine." Few poets so sensitively portray the insecure and victimized. In "The Boot Man," the narrator's mother sends him out with a set speech and a pair of shoes for the repairman.

> . . . She didn't know
> That given speech, to me, refused to come.
> I couldn't read aloud in class; sat dumb
> In front of howling print; could never bring
> On my bitched breath the words I should have said,
> Though they were pummelling inside my head.

The boot man, with "eyes a wash-tub blue" and "stork-head held sideways" exacerbates the situation, conjuring an image of the boy's dead father offering "a hand as colourless / As phosgene." This frightening vision will recur throughout the boy's life.

In some sense the writing of poetry is always an attempt to reconcile one's life with the lives and deaths of old ghosts. So Causley has turned, in this last decade or more, to fierce yet compassionate portraits of family, and of people and places that have most impressed him. Just as recent Causley poems like "Grandmother," "Dora," "Uncle Stan," "Photograph," "The Prodigal Son," and "When I Was Fourteen" make most recent American Family poems seem frivolous and defensive, his travelogue poems like "New Year's Eve, Athens," "Hussar," "In a Melbourne Suburb," and others reduce most similar American products to what they really are—hastily scribbled postcards. No doubt Causley's success in such poems has much to do with his firmly rooted sense of place and vigorous manipulation of traditional verse patterns. Again, most American poets cannot point to either of these factors as strengths in their work. Causley, an innovator working the oldest, most fecund literary soil, has few peers anywhere when it comes to sympathy, honesty, and accurate description.

> Down from the ribbed hill-crest
> Combers of grasses ride.
> Poppy, valerian

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Bleed by the lean lake-side.
"On Launceston Castle"

Since 1983 Amy Clampitt[3] has built a considerable reputation as a descriptive poet of the natural world, but in this and by other measures her verse does not compare well with the efforts of Tom Disch or Charles Causley. The following descriptive lines are from "John Donne in California": ". . . strenuous / huge, wind-curried hills, their green / gobleted just now with native poppies / opulent red-gold . . ." As a native of the California desert, I know that if the poppies have bloomed those hills are brown and dry, not *green.* Also, the native California poppy is orange. The red-gold variety made its way up to California much later from its point of origin in Mexico.

These mistakes are indicative of countless descriptive errors here, errors committed with such bathetic enthusiasm that one hesitates to criticize overly much. But the failure to criticize this poet has done her a serious disservice, encouraging her to rush four books into print in the last seven years, with each one much worse than the one before it. Along the way she has settled into her method, which is a simple one. Usually, her poems begin with a description of a still-life or incident, then proceed through a series of lists and loose associations to the point where sound and sense suddenly clash and funnel into a moment of forced profundity. In "The Field Pansy" the climactic moment sounds like this: "What is consequence? What difference do the minutiae / of that seeming inconsequence that's called beauty / add up to?" In "Deleted Passage" it reads "instantaneity of dreaming fusing / fluidity and rigor . . ."; in "A Whippoorwill in the Woods" we get "What is health? We must all die sometime."

These awkward, heavy-handed constructions have plagued Clampitt since her debut volume, providing the key to a deeper problem. Clearly, this poet's goal is to claim the intellectual and verbal high ground, conveying the inspired moment just as it struck her. But as the poet-critic Frederick Pollack has pointed out, Clampitt's verse is really "a product of will masquerading as inspiration." Despite linguistic excesses, each poem is an act of emotional desperation, a record of *not* letting anything else in. In *Westward* Clampitt does try to write more about the lives of other people than she has before, but she never finds these characters quite as interesting as the sound of her own speech. In "Iola, Kansas," the narrator opens with five quatrains, a list of standard crass America ("the scheme is a mess"). Then at a Kansas bus stop, a woman behind the counter offers a slice of blueberry pie she baked that day. The narrator runs down the pie ("the innards a purply glue") but eats it "with something akin to reverence." This reaction, and what follows, is quite curious: "I feel

[3] WESTWARD, by *Amy Clampitt.* Knopf. $9.95p.

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my heart go out, / out here in the middle of nowhere (the scheme is a mess) / to the waste, to the not knowing who or why, and am happy." This strikes me as an insincere attempt, at best, to put an emotional gloss on what has been a pretty cynical and condescending portrait.

Even Clampitt's own family does not escape the limits of her emotional transparencies. In "My Cousin Muriel," Clampitt recalls the last phone conversation between herself and her relative. Contrasting her own life with her cousin's, she describes herself (in a moment of supreme bathos) as a "childless spinner of metaphor"; her cousin is a "mother of four, worn down by arthritis, / her kidneys wasting, alone in a hospital / somewhere in California . . ." Despite her distress, the cousin has the compassion and interest to ask Clampitt "How's / your work going?" Clampitt follows with "As for what was hers—" After that dash we never really find out, for the writer zeroes in only on herself:

> . . . —well, it's my function
> to imagine scenes, try for connections
> as I'm trying now: a grope for words,
> the numb, all but immobilized trajectory
> to where my cousin, whom I've seen just once
> since she went there to live, lies dying.

Time and again, this poem veers from its fullest life, Cousin Muriel's, toward the author's copious observations about her own life. The flaw is repeated in other portraits like "The Subway Singer," "A Hedge of Rubber Trees," and "The Prairie," the book's final poem that labors through nineteen pages of endless lists and liberal references to Chekov, James, Emerson, and George Eliot.

An author recently made this apt comment in conversation. "Clampitt's poems," he said, "read like she crams *everything* in that pops into her mind. One can detect no editing at all!" Maybe this is why so many of our contemporary Thomas Higginsons celebrate them so.

Brad Leithauser's ascension and celebrity have come as swiftly as Amy Clampitt's, and he calls on more natural writing ability than she may ever hope to tap. Yet the twenty-three poems of his third volume[4] mostly spring from the casual impluse that has restricted his verse to the minor mode. Several of the poems are travelogues conveying the impression (like slight, efficient postcards) that the indolent traveler has energy enough only to scratch surfaces. The wholly unpopulated "Two Grotesques" uses abundant description to contrast tropical and arctic landscapes; the book's title poem deals

[4] THE MAIL FROM ANYWHERE, by *Brad Leithauser*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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with the traveler's loneliness and his excitement at receiving an overdue letter (". . . *A few weeks ago, / Someone was thinking of me.*"); in "Signalled" the narrator recalls childhood in Japan, but goes no deeper than a list anyone could construct from the daily news:

> The world is just
> Where you left it
> Out there you must
> Go out in it. Increasingly
>
> The news
> Doesn't it
> Comes likes this
> Bodiless
>
> And over blue
> Curved reaches the voices clearer
> Though farther
> Linking us to
>
> Our leaders and voter
> Profiles gain
> And loss the roaming walls
> Of local storms our falling rain
>
> Forests the murmur
> Of distant hunger . . .

Though what we might call Media-Speak is used in the last six lines above for the sake of belittling it, Leithauser often falls back on such language even when he is playing it straight. This indicates a serious flaw in the way he perceives and experiences the world. In "Glacier," for example, the poet grapples with description until he finally surrenders: "the glacier is a ship; the stones, / its single freight; / the sea, its port." If the poet can do no better than cliché, then it would be better to do nothing at all. In "Peninsular" the narrator leaves his rental car and walks toward a frozen shore in Iceland. The shore proves farther away than he judged, and as the freezing wind threatens to overcome the adventurer he seeks shelter in "a sort of crater below." There he comes up smack against "a grim- / eyed, wide-shouldered, skewbald ram." The description of the situation's next few minutes takes twenty-nine lines, though all that actually happens is this: man and beast stare at each other, man crouches, beast goes on grazing. The narrator has the harder time adjusting, "having first to unload my sense of / something bizarre / or noble or at least meaningful / in his having chosen to make his meal / in such an embittered locale." But at last he concludes that "no place is

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out-of-the-way to the creature / grounding its livelihood there— / a message of concern / only to those / so rootless somehow they might / even for a moment have forgotten it." A lot of writing here has produced only an awkward approximation of a valuable emotional insight. Leithauser should take a look at John Haines's poems set in the Alaska wilderness to get some idea of what the real thing both sounds and feels like.

Leithauser is better when he puts his brochures and triptiks away to turn to more personal subjects. "Your Natural History" and "First Birthday," poems about the joyful arrival of children, are definite improvements, as are "Uncle Grant" and "The Caller," two longer poems about odd, distant relatives. "The Caller," a meditation on the narrator's great-aunt Lucinda, contains some of Leithauser's best writing:

> . . . She knew she'd
> Scared them all, from the children on up, really:
> Parents, teachers—and that squirming sinner
> Of a superintendent, too. And she didn't need
> Her height to work this on them, though
> As for that, proudly six feet tall she stood. No,
> This was the fear that those that have no inner
> Elevation always feel for those that do.
> She knew her poetry. And by God she knew
> There wasn't a soul in this sawdust town
> Who could, when she felt rightful, stare her down.

Here is a character worth hearing about, and we do, but only to a point. We learn that this aging spinster-schoolteacher lives with her brother Chuck, who walks with a cane due "to a youthful mishap at the mill." We learn that she broods in her classroom at day's end, chain-smoking and recalling how, when she was a girl, the boys would taunt her: "*Lucinda, Lucinda, she fell out of the winda.*" We are told that the narrator's grandfather once suggested that Lucinda had "no use for men," that grandmother claimed "*she may be brokenhearted.*" The narrator even suggests that she isolates herself in a haze of cigarette smoke to avoid the drudgery of her home life.

The possibilities are enticing, and Leithauser clearly has a feel for bumpy psychological weather, but he backs off, loosening the weave of his design just as he should be tying all of the loose ends together. We never see why Lucinda bears such a consuming grudge against the world. We gather that she is an ardent reader of poetry, that boys once embarrassed her, that she considers her brother a coarse lightweight, but surely there is much more to distinguish her situation. The grandparents make glancing comments about her sexual preference and disappointment in love, but neither is followed up or developed. The poet misses opportunities to make critical connections

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and transitions, as he does when referring to the superintendent as "that squirming sinner." This information is simply stated, then dropped. But what does it mean? Even the poem's title is misleading, referring to the brother who would interrupt Lucinda's seclusion by calling her down to dinner. The brother, about whom we learn very little, is a shadowy, potent figure who is wasted here. But despite the gaps and missed connections that mar "The Caller," it is Leithauser's most ambitious poem so far. Perhaps it suggests more fully realized work to come.

Though Jim Daniels won the Brittingham Prize for *Places/Everyone*, his first book published in 1985, his poetry has not received the acclaim accorded to the work of Amy Clampitt or Brad Leithauser. In a literary climate where merit was more important than it is now, this would not be so. *Punching Out,*[5] a sequence of sixty-three poems, defies in every sense one's conventional response to poetry. Daniels' compact, terse line speeds down the page with the rapidity and power of a jackhammer, rendering irrelevant the usual speculations on rhythm and meter. Concentrating throughout on a central character, Digger, and his co-workers in a Detroit auto factory, the poet's personality all but disappears behind the commanding presence of a unique and wholly believable American cast of characters. In fact, *Punching Out* reads more like a delicious, rollicking novel than like almost any book of contemporary verse. This is all to the good.

In the July/August '90 issue of *American Book Review*, Warren Woessner concluded his review of two books with this peculiar assertion: "Ultimately, poetry that focuses on the hopeless members of a class is simply patronizing." This smug oversimplification is itself patronizing, but nothing gives its lie back more resoundingly than *Punching Out.* Few books in recent memory have presented intact such an important American community, one that has steadily lost economic and political ground over the last decade. It is a grim portrait, to be sure, but one would err in assuming that this book lacks humor and tenderness. In this life, all Hells will be temporarily thwarted by small moments of triumph.

Heaven Enough

Odie and I punch in and find
the day shift's left us
six good stacks of blanks
lined up in front of the press.

Cold outside—sleet, slush.
The coffee between our hands first break
is heaven enough to take our time over.

[5] PUNCHING OUT, by *Jim Daniels.* Wayne State University Press. $17.95; $9.95.

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At lunch, I splurge on Twinkies,
shove them in my face.
Digger, my man, you are a twinkie,
Odie says. I talk with my mouth full.

Last break, Nita shakes her butt and sings
Aretha: *Chain, chain, chain . . .*
chain of fools. We whistle and clap.
That's what you all be,
a chain of fools, she laughs. We nod.

Even on the job, I'm happy, happy
for no reason, stacking the blanks
like I'm building something
I could hold onto. The press crunches
down, bends the metal.
I just nod and sing.

Such moments *do* come, though for Digger, Odie, Cowboy, Dude, the foreman Santino, Nita, Bush, and the other assemblyline workers, they are fleeting. The finely distilled facts about Paul Pakowski might speak for all of them, and for American industry, generally: "After 38 years, his job / simplified itself / to two phrases: / *Fuck foreman.* / *Go slow.*" Daniels depicts factory life as a perpetual cat-and-mouse game between the workers and management, a game where efficiency got dropped from the equation long ago. A less talented poet might romanticize the workers' condition at the expense of management, but Daniels presents both sides honestly. He does so because he has learned something from all of his characters. He cares for them, regardless of which side they are on. His most useful implied criticism is reserved for the system itself, a system that codifies human behavior and bludgeons the individual into ever more impossible roles and situations.

As with the best poetry, one can read Jim Daniels on many levels. Not to read him at all is to miss a most important and original contemporary.

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FELIX STEFANILE

Dante for All of Us

IN HIS INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS TO THE THREE CANTICLES of his translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, James Finn Cotter[1] appeals to, and challenges the reader to accept this great work as the genuine account of one individual's actual and specific mystical and spiritual experience. He places Dante in the company of St. Anthony of the desert, St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius, among others, and in no uncertain terms, especially in his essay on the *Inferno*, puts forth the concept of the *Divine Comedy* as a spiritual exercise full of insights for the reader who gives himself over to the poem. The aim of Cotter's attitude toward his material is made evident with his very first line, opening the *Inferno*:

> Halfway through the journey we are living

Nowhere else among the translations of the fairly recent past (since 1954, let us say), will the "la nostra vita" of the famous first line, our life, be rendered into English in any other manner. I suspect this statement holds for older versions of Dante as well. Cotter, however, is sure in his conviction; he wants his reader to be made aware of the poem embarked upon as an action we are living through and experiencing, not as an abstraction, or a concept. Perhaps the point I make here is not too small, and is fairly typical of Cotter's labors to press his urgency forward throughout the whole work.

Something like this happens again in Canto XI, *Inferno*, 79–83, the map-canto of Hell that every teacher of Dante makes certain to explicate to his students. I use Charles S. Singleton's prose version of the lines first, as representative of other recent translations: *Do you not remember the words with which your Ethics treats the three dispositions which Heaven wills not: incontinence, malice, and bestiality?* (Virgil is chiding Dante.) Cotter's lines follow:

> Do you not remember those passages
> In which your *Ethics* treats in full detail
> The three perversities opposed by Heaven:

[1] THE DIVINE COMEDY, by *Dante Alighieri*. Trans. by *James Finn Cotter*. Amity House. $24.95. Distributed by Element Books, 36 Marmion Way, Rockport, Massachusetts 01966.

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Incontinence, maliciousness, and raving
Bestiality—

I call attention to the word "perversities" here. Dante's word is "disposizion," a poetic plural without the ending letter *i*. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Ciardi, H. R. Huse, Allen Mandelbaum all adopt our word "dispositions" here. Dorothy L. Sayers chooses the word "conditions." I shall gingerly avoid all discussion, in this matter, of the translator's time-hallowed superstition concerning the exchange of cognates in transferring from one language to another. Though the fear of cousin-words is common to translators, in the case of "dispositions" most of our writers remain impervious to that fear, and blithely forge ahead with unruffled dispositions. Cotter's option, perversities, not only maintains the staid rule of avoidance with which I generally feel comfortable, but serves that urgency of his I have already mentioned. Perversities, while not far off from dispositions in connoting distribution and placement, carries a bit further along the idea of inclination and bent, the veering off, the off-turn of per-verse. Cotter's view, as I see it, is that Dante cites Aristotle's *Ethics* on a matter of sins, not happy or evil "dispositions." Cotter is often hard-nosed this way as a translator, and sometimes nitty-gritty. The characteristic gives his book a piquant originality.

To give a fuller, less testy, and more typical example of what James Finn Cotter can do with Dante's Italian I offer an excerpt below that introduces Canto XXIV, *Inferno*, 1–15. It is a notably poignant passage that has been remarked by scholars (C. H. Grandgent for one), not only for the graciousness of the simile, but for its occurrence at a juncture in Dante's pilgrimage just before the horrors of Hell are—if such can be imagined—to be considerably increased, for Dante and Virgil are now approaching the very Pit.

In quella parte del giovanetto anno
Che 'l sole i crin sotto l'Aquario tempra
E gia' le notti al mezzo di' sen vanno,

Quando la brina in su la terra assempra
L'immagine di sua sorella bianca—
Ma poco dura a la sua penna tempra—

Lo villanello, a cui la roba manca,
Si leva e guarda, e vede la campagna
Biancheggiar tutta, ond' ei si batte l'anca,

Ritorna in casa, e qua e la' si lagna,
Come 'l tapin che non sa che si faccia;
Poi riede, e la speranza ringavagna,

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Veggendo il mondo aver cangiata faccia
In poco d'ora, e prende suo vincastro
E fuor le pecorelle a pascar caccia:

When in the season of the youthful year
The Sun warms his rays beneath Aquarius,
And soon the nights shall meet the days halfway,

When the hoarfrost paints upon the ground
The perfect picture of his snow-white sister
(But pigment from the brush soon vanishes),

The peasant, short of fodder for his sheep,
Wakes up and looks out and sees the fields
All blanketed in white, he smacks his thigh,

Turns back indoors, and walking up and down,
Frets like a wretch not knowing what to do;
Out he comes once more, and hope revives,

When he sees the world has changed its face
In so brief a time, and he takes up his staff
To drive the sheep outside to the green pasture:

This word-painting of an early winter scene is intended to reflect Dante's emotions as he observes on the face of his guide and mentor, Virgil, the pallor of a momentary fear that, like hoarfrost, comes and goes. The Italian lines are lush and ample, yet homely, even a little cozy. The bucolic scene opens prettily, in the best classical manner, yet rapidly and smoothly settles into direct and simple exposition. Cotter handles the passage deftly: his blank verse is supple, with a little skip to it. His tercets are modulated gracefully, and his syntax is comfortably obedient to the original model. I have my questions about "snow-white sister" as a rendering of what Dante wrote, but my cavil is not meant to be dangerous. Cotter's version is faithful and whole, and the poetry has a ring to it. I have compared Cotter here to all the other translators I have mentioned already; in my opinion none does better at this place. I could offer other examples as well.

We may remember that John Ciardi, in his "Translator's Note" to his *Purgatorio* volume voiced his objections to the use of blank verse in translating Dante. His major claim is that our heroic line has a tendency to crest into verse paragraphs, and that this mounting rhythmic wave works against the intrinsic triadic "pace" (Ciardi's word), of Dante's *terza rima*. Ciardi's solution to this problem of pace was his own unlinked A X A stanza, which led him to his own perils, not without their charm, like the rhymed couplets with which he

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concluded his cantos. Ciardi was modest about his venture, as Dante translators are. We are, of course, glad for Ciardi's Dante, even as we can all agree that the steady murmur of Dante's interlinked rhyme scheme is difficult to capture in English. I bring all this up in preparation for another example of Cotter's deftness as a translator that perhaps sheds further light on the nature of the *terza rima*, and what we are faced with in dealing with such a sinewy, protean poet as Dante.

The excerpt I serve is brief, but fairly representative of longer excerpts that could have been used. It is taken from Canto XVIII, *Paradiso*, 73–78. Dante is now, in the company of Beatrice, in the Heaven of Jupiter, where the spirits of the just have found their eternal home. The *Paradiso* is often expressed by Dante in images of light and flight. Bird images occur frequently, though not as often as those of light, color, rainbows, celestial bands of effulgence, angelic rings and circles of radiance that sing. In this passage the divine spirits, points of light, flock together to spell out—and sing—in Latin the first lines from the *Book of Wisdom*: "Love justice you rulers of the earth."

> And as birds risen from a river bank,
> As though rejoicing in their pasture, fly
> Now in a circle, now in a long line,
>
> So in those lights were holy creatures singing
> While they were flying, and their figures
> Formed letters, now D, now I, now L.

The skywriting will go on to spell out *Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram*. Here is the Italian:

> *E come augelli surti di rivera,*
> *Quasi congratulando a lor pasture,*
> *Fanno di se' or tonda or altra schiera,*
>
> *Si dentro ai lumi sante creature*
> *Voltando cantavano, e faciensi*
> *Or D, or I, or L, in sue figure.*

What we have is a perfect little sestet, whole in itself within a larger whole, and the work of the *terza rima* displayed in an especially stunning way by the sequence of the *pasture-creature-figure* rhymes, springing inexorably one from another: from their *pasture* bird-like *creature* rising to form *figure*. In the visual imagery intended the emphasis of the last rhyme is especially telling. Lawrence Binyon, John Ciardi, and Dorothy L. Sayers have all rhymed Dante, and the reader is invited to look them up, but my business is with Cotter.

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He gets two words where they literally belong, at the end of the line: "river bank" and "line." He almost succeeds with "pasture," and misses, though heroically, by one line with "figures," or we may put it that he places "figures" in front of, yet next to, instead of in back of the letters being formed. As pointed out earlier Cotter's sense of Dante's syntax is clear, and he preserves Dante's statement as a single sentence. The English blank verse is spry and lilting, the translation quite faithful. The sestet nature of Dante's language is maintained successfully. We must grant that we do not possess Dante's original *terza rima*, but the pace is there, and the accurate, pleasing English is laudable. No padding, no inversions, no words substituted to keep a rhyme.

Dante's *Paradiso* is notable for the fluidity of his juxtapositions of vivid panoramas—the sweeping, veering, shifting heights of heaven—with close-up shots of Beatrice, or the saints, exhorting and haranguing Dante, often intense disquisitions that arrest the action going on, and the reader as well. This exchange of reference points can be both taxing and intriguing to the diligent reader. Some of the fairly long expository passages are extremely difficult to render in lively idiom. Sometimes Cotter's lines sag here. Such occasions are not frequent, and Cotter's energetic, unpretentious English usually saves the day.

His accessibility—few random flights, no tinklings, a gratuitous rhyme, with its unprofit, only rarely appearing—leads him to another departure from the practice of his colleagues in the field. Cotter almost regularly, except when the language is embedded in the figurative discourse, as in the Italian just quoted, translates Dante's Latin lines into English. These excerpts are usually prayers, and verses from the Vulgate Bible, often the Psalms. Such englishing may be heady stuff indeed for Dante's dignity, but must be a boon to sincere, diffident readers to whom Latin quotations, like landmark buildings, are to be approved, but not visited. He leaves presumably familiar phrases, like *Agnus Dei*, alone, but he changes the lines from the Beatitudes, for instance, into English. This "style" of translating is probably related to Cotter's sense of outreach, a way of involving people. We have here no light question for students of Dante. Literary tone is implicated in the choice Cotter makes, and perhaps relevant matters of staging, of which Dante would have been well aware. Let's face it, given Dante's theater in Heaven, Latin chants issuing melodiously from a cloud of miracle on high produce a certain effect. Yet it is precisely this sort of moderate swerving from the common practice of modern translators of Dante that gives Cotter's *Divine Comedy* its spry and interesting character.

In the matter of editorial apparatus accompanying his translation Cotter is perhaps too unimposing. His notes are at times definitely chary. He explains, succinctly, mythological allusions as they appear in the text; he defines some philosophical terms. He offers suitable, and always brief, explanations of Dante's astronomy and geography.

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He cites Italian historical events indefatigably, names, dates, battles, etc., but usually with too little hinting of larger meanings that inhere in the lines or phrases being footnoted. There are no surging, enthusiastic glosses of the kind one gets in the notes of Dorothy L. Sayers, which are sometimes fun to read in themselves, and put the reader at ease. On the other hand, Cotter's introductory essays, as I read them, are exceptionally strong. They not only invite and challenge the reader philosophically, but in a confident and lucid manner run like paraphrases of the material that is to follow in the canticles. There is a sure connection between these essays and the cantos they "explain." If we can assume a certain vigor in a person who chooses to read Dante in translation—the poem is no drug-store book rack item—we may also assume that such a reader will eventually catch the interrelationship of essay, verse, and notes. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the essays are meant to be consulted.

Cotter's book is a pretty, one-volume edition. The three-in-one packaging is hefty, but the book is well bound, and has survived my steady handling over several weeks. I have no doubt that as a school text the book will prove serviceable. An additional dividend in having all of the *Divine Comedy* between the same covers is the lure it presents to the reader to read on after the *Inferno*, conceded by most people to be the "popular" Dante. Having the opportunity the reader may proceed to discover that the *Purgatorio* is a benign mirror-image of the *Inferno*, in which sinners are not condemned, but cured, and where the high argumentation, the intensely reasoned disciplining of the penitents is as thought-provoking as the punishments in Hell. The reader will meet the lovely Matilda, every bit as touching as Francesca, about whom operas have been written, and a lot happier. In the *Paradiso* he will encounter Dante's ancestor, Cacciaguida, prouder and feistier than Farinata degli Uberti. All of this is a possibility.

The edition is accompanied by the complete illustrations of William Blake. The drawings are beautifully placed, and often succeed as handy "captions" in themselves for the vivid passages they illustrate. The plates and engravings inserted, like an appendix, at the back of the book, are an inducement to ramble and idle, not a bad idea for so ample a book. The format of Cotter's page is, I am sorry to say, not common to Dante publishing. Cotter's tercets are spaced as stanzas; this simple design-factor gives an easy look for the reader, and makes locating passages easier. For the reader who is trying Dante in the original Italian, but feels the need for the company of an English version, this matter of format is an immense help. A final point about this edition of Dante: there are a number of typographical errors. Most of them are of the kind a reader will be able to correct automatically. It is to be hoped that a future edition of this book will eliminate this problem.

It has been said that every age needs its own translations of the great works of foreign literature. This is, of course, true, and in the

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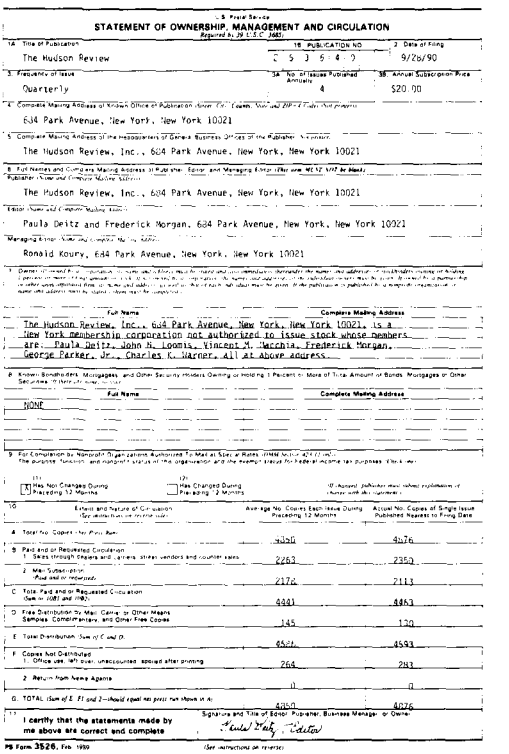
case of great translations, not entirely true. Most of us are fond of the King James Bible, in its various "true" editions, pretty much as it is. In the present age, I know of six new versions of Dante since 1964: if one includes the 1970 re-issue of Longfellow's 1867 opus, the number comes to seven. This averages to a new Dante every five or six years. The competition of publishers is at work here, we know, as well as the inevitable recalcitrance of a great classic. The recalcitrance is a matter of riches, as well as difficulties. Against this backdrop of a veritable Dante industry, and in the context of the perennial fascination exerted by Dante on writers and translators, James Finn Cotter's new version of the *Commedia* asserts its own honorable presence.

Coming in the Spring 1991 issue of The Hudson Review: "Love in the West," a memoir by Louis Simpson, "The Academic Zoo," a review/essay by Joseph Epstein, and "The Neighborhood," a long poem by Robert McDowell.



STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION

1A. Title of Publication	The Hudson Review
1B. Publication No.	0 5 3 6 4 0
2. Date of Filing	9/26/90
3. Frequency of Issue	Quarterly
3A. No. of Issues Published Annually	4
3B. Annual Subscription Price	$20.00
4. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication	684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021
5. Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters of General Business Offices of the Publisher	The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021
6. Full Names and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor	Publisher: The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021 Editor: Paula Deitz and Frederick Morgan, 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021 Managing Editor: Ronald Koury, 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021
7. Owner	Full Name: The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021, is a New York membership corporation not authorized to issue stock whose members are: Paula Deitz, John H. Loomis, Vincent M. Macchia, Frederick Morgan, George Parker, Jr., Charles K. Warner, all at above address.
8. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities	Full Name: NONE
9. For Completion by Nonprofit Organizations Authorized To Mail at Special Rates	[X] Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months; [ ] Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months

10. Extent and Nature of Circulation	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	Actual No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
A. Total No. Copies (Net Press Run)	4450	4476
B. Paid and/or Requested Circulation 1. Sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors and Counter Sales	2263	2350
2. Mail Subscription (Paid and/or Requested)	2170	2113
C. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation (Sum of 10B1 and 10B2)	4433	4463
D. Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier or Other Means Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free Copies	145	130
E. Total Distribution (Sum of C and D)	4578	4593
F. Copies Not Distributed 1. Office use, left over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing	264	243
2. Return from News Agents	0	0
G. TOTAL (Sum of E, F1 and 2—should equal net press run shown in A)	4450	4076

11. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner: Ronald Koury, Publisher

PS Form 3526, Feb 1989 (See instructions on reverse)

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DEAN FLOWER

The Reticence of William Trevor

ALMOST ANY WILLIAM TREVOR STORY, SKETCHED QUICKLY, can suggest how powerful his basic conceptions are. A teacher ridicules a slow child, but he earnestly seeks her approval. When she refuses sympathy, he finds that the only response is to hurt her in return. His opportunity comes, horrifyingly, when she has a baby ("Miss Smith," 1967). Everyone likes the mild husband and is shocked by the bitchy wife, who punishes him systematically with verbal nastiness and ill-concealed affairs. But what emerges is that she's surrendered her life to playing humiliation games in order to satisfy his monstrous masochism ("The Bedroom Eyes of Mrs. Vansittart," 1981). A woman adopts a child at birth but eight years later the mother, now married and comfortable, wants the child back. Setting aside her own needs and rights, the adoptive mother succumbs to selfish arguments of others—and decides it would be best to give up the child ("Being Stolen From," 1981). Even when all the artful telling of these stories is stripped away, Trevor's force remains. He has now published 84 stories in seven books since 1967 (not to mention ten novels), and his themes are the same: disillusionment, dispossession, deception, the anguish of those who are good, the humanness of those who are cruel, the awful intelligibility of evil, pain, and harm.

Take "Kathleen's Field" for example, the last of a dozen stories in Trevor's most recent collection, *Family Sins.*[1] Kathleen Hagarty's father wants to buy a rich pasture, adjacent to his impoverished little farm in Ireland. The bank won't loan him money, and he can't raise enough by selling his prize bullocks. But the Shaughnessys are affluent, and want a slavey to keep house for them in town; they loan Hagarty the money in exchange for Kathleen. She is so plain, everybody knows she'll never marry. And besides, all the other children have moved away—except for the eldest male who will inherit a better farm and marry well if Kathleen sacrifices fourteen years of her life. Never mind that Mrs. Shaughnessy is critical and impatient and lazy, or that Mr. Shaughnessy finds a subtle way of tyrannizing Kathleen sexually. It's all for the good of the family.

[1] FAMILY SINS, by *William Trevor.* Viking. $18.95. Stories that appear in earlier collections are indicated by a date: *The Day We Got Drunk on Cake,* 1967; *The Ballroom of Romance,* 1972; *Angels at the Ritz,* 1975; *Lovers of Their Time,* 1978; *Beyond the Pale,* 1981; *The News from Ireland,* 1986.

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"You're a great girl," her father says, unaware that he's forced his daughter into a form of prostitution.

Trevor makes such powerful material work by systematic self-effacement. His techniques may seem old fashioned at first, permitting leisurely exposition and switching from one point of view to another. But soon you realize that no judgments come from the author, that the style conforms to each character, and objective-sounding information is really subjective, frequently verging on indirect discourse. Hagarty for example sits in the pub "with a bottle of stout to console him," telling himself that since he's already paid to have the bullocks penned, "he might as well take full advantage of it by delaying a little longer." Trevor's indebtedness to the James Joyce of *Dubliners* is especially apparent here; both are masters of the subjective third-person and the ironic nuances of indirect discourse. Here's a choice moment, from "In Love with Ariadne," where Trevor shifts from direct to indirect:

> "If there's a man in Dublin that knows his bricks and mortar better than Ned Sheehy give me a gander at him."
>
> Barney said he didn't think he could supply the old woman with such a person, and she said that of course he couldn't. No flies on Ned Sheehy, she said, in spite of what you might think to look at him.

Joyce ends "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" with the exquisitely ironic anticlimax, "Mr. Crofton said that it was a very fine piece of writing"; Trevor ends "Kathleen's Field" with an equally crushing use of the device, "her mother would say again that a bargain was a bargain."

Sometimes Trevor will switch from direct to indirect discourse five or six times in a short scene. It's all so swiftly and compactly done you hardly notice the narrator's voice is absent. Trevor also switches quickly from one character's mind to another, untroubled by Jamesian conventions, yet the effect is never omniscience. In "A Husband's Return" the first four paragraphs convey four different minds, without any "author" there at all; in "A Trinity" the irritations of husband and wife interweave so inconspicuously we hear them both thinking and take neither side: "The trouble with Keith was, he always sounded confident, as though he knew something she didn't"; and then "[Keith] wished she'd leave the talking to him." Trevor also likes to intercut dialogue with remembrances. In "The Third Party" and "August Saturday" conversations go on in the present while the main character's attention keeps lapsing and escaping into the past. Eventually memory becomes the more powerful storyteller. Often too Trevor will embed a letter or fragments from a journal in a story so as to complicate and extend a seemingly simple point of view. What all these techniques have in common is the author's disappearance from

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the text. You never quite hear Trevor's own voice. Even stories that sound like autobiography—"A Choice of Butchers" (1972), "Matilda's England" (1978), *Nights at the Alexandria* (1987)—turn out to be just first-person fictions, about different Irish childhoods that may or may not resemble the author's. For decades now the dust jackets have informed us simply that Trevor was born in County Cork and "lives in Devon with his wife and two sons." His reticence is just about flawless.

I do not mean to suggest that Trevor never adopts a storyteller's expository "once upon a time" role. He often begins in this seemingly authoritative old mode, e.g., the first story in *Family Sins*: "Nothing as appalling had happened before at Drimaghleen; its people had never been as shocked." And he sometimes ends stories with a George Eliot-like summation (e.g., "The Wedding in the Garden," 1986). But in these roles he reveals no trace of performative ego. Even when he's onstage he's off: the words are someone else's. One reviewer complained a few years ago that Trevor was prudish about sex, assuming from the opening words of "Mulvihill's Memorial" (1981) that the author had to be squeamish to describe details in a pornographic film with such dowdy language as "petticoat," "further underclothes," and "divested himself." In fact the description amusingly reflects the quaintly inhibited prurience of a middle-aged bachelor, Mulvihill himself. The only lapse in Trevor's rigorous self-effacement that I have ever found occurs in "The Time of Year" (1981) when a tall, awkward boy is said to give "the impression of an etiolated newt." It's an almost shocking intrusion.

The truth is that Trevor does not want to tell his own stories, he wants other people to tell theirs. Curiosity about others, he once said, impels him to write.[2] He is fascinated by other people's worlds, especially by their ability to invent coercive fictions or to be victimized by them. Apparent in Trevor's earliest work (e.g., "The Table," 1967), the theme has become noticeably darker in recent years. Ever since *Other People's Worlds* (1980), his novel about a pathological actor-liar-fantasizer and the swath of destruction he cuts in other lives, Trevor's fiction has emphasized that storytelling itself is dangerous. And everyone has a story to inflict on someone else. Each story in *Family Sins* involves someone's coercive narrative, some reductive and destructive fable. The first one, for example, "Events at Drimaghleen" describes the murder of a young woman, her boyfriend, and his mother, all violently shotgunned in a farmyard. The young woman's parents decide at once who killed whom and why, but along come two English journalists, offering money and taking pictures, and they produce a dramatically different story, more plausible in some ways than the first, but blighting the lives of the parents. Trevor prevents

[2] *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 14 (Detroit, 1983), p. 730.

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us from determining what really happened; the two explanations are equally Procrustean, each useful (in a terrible way) and made to fit rather than true. That families and communities do this just as much as individuals is a truth Trevor has been telling for years.

The dangerous storyteller in "Family Sins" is Hubert, a school chum of the narrator's who invites him home for the weekend. Hubert's tales in the dormitory were funny (he ridiculed his grandfather) and glamorous (his father was a con man, his mother a barmaid; both were killed in a head-on collision). But at home Hubert's stories are exposed as manipulative and cruel, and pathetically self-deceiving. Even when disillusioned the narrator wants to believe it when Hubert claims he was born in the back row of a cinema. And Hubert's tale of his parents' collision—with a truck of a traveling zoo, and the escaping apes "chattered with delight"—reappears with peculiar force in the narrator's dream. There's a deep warning here about fictive truth. It jumps so easily from one mind to another, and seems to have happened there, in effect *has* happened, even though it didn't.

In "Coffee with Oliver" Trevor studies the systematic lies and deceptions by which a rather charming old Englishman in Florence manages to eke out his impoverished life. Oliver cadges and gyps and rationalizes, stealing a little something from everyone (including his dying mother), and always finds a neat justification for it. His solipsism is almost impeccable. Told entirely from his point of view, the story is both comic and savagely critical. Oliver knows exactly how to deal with others who wish to talk: "finding the interruption of his own narration discourteous, Oliver did not listen." He is of course so busy narrating his life into palatable form that he cannot listen to anyone else. Trevor has a seemingly endless supply of such bad listeners. They are usually male, frequently headmasters of boarding schools or businessmen, and they all have impervious egos.

"The Third Party" consists of two male narratives in competition. Lairdman has been having an affair with Boland's wife, so they meet in a bar to settle things. Lairdman wants to marry Annabella and Boland wants nothing more than to surrender her, but he can't resist "correcting" the story of her that Lairdman has in his head. He's also busy despising Lairdman, whom he remembers from boarding school days as a prig. Boland's idea of his wife is "that she can't help telling lies" and "actually disliked the truth." He doesn't see how his own storytelling—not hers—betrays him. He would end his unhappy marriage, he knows he should. But anger and pride will not release him from the "truth" he must tell. Trevor's stories say this again and again. Old injuries, old resentments and grievances harden into the fictions that rule our lives. We keep uttering them to ourselves and others not to find absolution or escape but to justify ourselves after all. To have the last word. To impose our truth no matter what.

When communities and nations do this, Trevor suggests, the costs

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are even more unbearable. His two most recent novels, *Fools of Fortune* (1983) and *The Silence in the Garden* (1988), are clearly his best—most heartbreaking, most disturbing, most complex—because they address exactly the problem of coercive narrative and silenced truth. The news from Ireland, as Trevor's 1986 story about the potato famine suggests, hasn't essentially changed for 150 years; they're still rewriting the same old tales. But Trevor is exposing those old mechanisms in a way nobody has before. The finest story in *Family Sins*, "In Love with Ariadne," dramatizes how a young woman in Dublin is tainted by her father's crime, shamed and stigmatized forever by the whispered story of his pedophilia. So powerful is that collusive narrative that Ariadne must internalize it. When the story's protagonist, a young medical student from the country, tries to woo her away with his own fictions, he finds not only that his efforts have driven her into a convent but that what attracted him in the first place was abnormal, the vestige of family sin: "what seemed like a marvel of strangeness in Ariadne was damage wrought by shame." Repelled by ordinary women, drawn by her very unreachability, he falls into the same web of shame. Thus ever so subtly and dangerously in Trevor's world do the sins of the fathers visit themselves upon the next generation.

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GARY KRIST

Innovation Without Tears

ONE OF OUR MORE CYNICAL CRITICS once defined experimental fiction as fiction in which the experiment has failed. Admittedly, this definition was probably intended more as provocation than as description, but I can certainly sympathize with the frustration behind it. Although I missed that Golden Age of bad experimental art—the 1960s—I did experience its mini-renaissance in the 1980s, mostly in theater and dance. I sat through my share of endless late-night performances in which people dressed in oversized clothing made smug little pronouncements into microphones while monotonous synthesized music played in the background. Artists seemed to think that they could get away with any kind of bombast and pretension as long as they undermined it every once in a while with a touch of adolescent, self-conscious, post-modern humor.

In fiction, the failed experiments of the 1980s never seemed quite so egregious, maybe because the economics of publishing prevented the appearance of a lot of experimental writing, whether good or bad. But while straightforward realism was definitely in the ascendant during the decade just past, there was a lot of first-rate innovative fiction published as well—by Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie, to name just two of my favorites. And if the five books reviewed below are any indication, that trend is continuing in the nineties. All five are, at least to a degree, innovative in form; a couple of them might even be considered experimental. They are, however, quite readable, borrowing liberally from the toolbox of realism even as they gently depart from its characteristic orderly narrative. These five authors prove that experimentation, even when it goes awry, need not be synonymous with obscurity, self-indulgence, and tedium.

In "Speaking of Courage," one of the stories in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*,[1] a recently returned Vietnam veteran is driving around a lake near his hometown in Iowa. It is the Fourth of July; the war is over. The ex-soldier, Norman Bowker, has nowhere in particular to go, so he drives around that flat, featureless lake—once, twice, seven times—passing the same pair of hiking boys over and over again, the same man in a stalled motorboat, the same woman in pedal pushers fishing for bullheads. He has the radio on, but he's not really

[1] THE THINGS THEY CARRIED, by *Tim O'Brien*. Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. $19.95.

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listening to it. His head is too full of the war—of stories he would like to tell his father, but cannot. So he's working the stories out of himself. He's driving, going over the same territory again and again, hoping to dispel the malignant energies of those stories.

That's how O'Brien's book operates too. The author works through many of the same horrifying incidents several times, depicting them from different perspectives, putting them into different contexts: A young foot soldier is blown into a tree by a land mine; another sinks helplessly into a swollen river of mud and excrement; a slender Vietnamese man walks down a dark trail one night and is transformed into a bloody corpse with a star-shaped hole for an eye. At times, *The Things They Carried* resembles a modern *Canterbury Tales*, only the tale-swapping pilgrims are soldiers this time, and on their way to a much more morally ambiguous goal. At other times, the book seems more like a Vietnam version of *As I Lay Dying*, each character's perspective on the events adding to a more complex narrative whole.

Tying the various incidents together is the voice of Tim O'Brien, the narrator, who does most of the storytelling in the book. O'Brien tells us bluntly that his stories are fiction, but that their story-truth is truer than what he calls happening-truth. He mentions a familiar war story: Four soldiers are walking down a road. A grenade drops into their path. One man, the hero, jumps on it and saves the other three at the cost of his own life. That, according to O'Brien, may be a story that really happened, but it's not a true war story:

> Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. For example: Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it's a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die, though, one of the dead guys says, "The fuck you do *that* for?" and the jumper says, "Story of my life, man," and the other guy starts to smile but he's dead.
>
> That's a true story that never happened.

The point about story-truth is obvious, of course, and some lovers of the slick avoidance practiced in much contemporary fiction may find O'Brien's honest, almost naive directness a bit embarrassing. He's fearless in his determination to talk explicitly about things like Truth (with a capital T), emotion, and psychic pain. But it's a gamble that pays off in the end. *The Things They Carried* ultimately has enormous cathartic power. As a member of a generation that was too young to fight in the war but old enough to feel alienated by it, I didn't think I could respond to a Vietnam book as deeply and personally as I did to this one.

O'Brien's use of himself as a character, under his own name and résumé, is certainly nothing profoundly new or innovative—after all, Christopher Isherwood was turning up in his own Berlin stories back

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in the 1930s—but it is indicative of a greater willingness among writers recently to blur the line between autobiography and fiction in fruitful ways. Andrei Sinyavsky, a Russian émigré now living in France, uses a similar narrative ploy in his extremely idiosyncratic novel *Goodnight!*[2] The book is a free-form invention on the author's experience as a child of what he calls "the epoch of mature, late-flowering Stalinism." And while the events depicted in the novel are rooted in fact, Sinyavsky's loose narrative admits all kinds of flourishes and flights of fancy—including a few playlets, a short story, and even a "Treatise on Mice" interpolated into the text.

Sinyavsky, it should be noted, occupies a unique position in his country's literature: according to his translator Richard Lourie (a talented comic novelist in his own right), he was the first Soviet writer to be tried and convicted for opinions expressed by fictional characters. In the years after Stalin's death, Sinyavsky had begun writing novels and essays as Abram Tertz, an invented alter ego named after the Jewish hero of songs sung by the thieves of Odessa. The books were smuggled out of the country and published in the West, and since they were regarded as treasonous by the Soviet authorities, a six-year investigation ensued. Sinyavsky was finally identified as the author in 1965. He and another writer, Yuli Daniel, were arrested and tried, and Sinyavsky spent the next six years in prison. In 1973 he and his wife emigrated to Paris, where he now teaches Russian Literature at the Sorbonne.

These biographical data are the raw material from which Sinyavsky creates his novel, which can best be characterized as a kind of jazz symphony with five movements masquerading as chapters. Each of the five is based around a single theme on which the author improvises in less-than-linear fashion. As he himself admits early on: "I can see that my narration is bounding away from me like a kangaroo, then returning to hit the ground at my feet like a boomerang. That must be the nature of this story, this effort of memory to bring hero and author into a significant unity, to bind a variety of parts into a harmonious chain of causality where real time is not too binding." Given this sometimes bewildering jumpiness, one is especially grateful for the translator's helpful biographical introduction.

The first chapter of the novel covers the author's arrest, interrogation, and trial. It is in some ways the most surreal—and certainly the funniest—section of the book, as Sinyavsky's captors go through a series of psychological calisthenics, one moment befriending him, the next condemning him, but always attempting to steal the moral high ground from under his feet: "It was not he [the KGB supervisor] who was cruel but we who were cruel to him, we suspects, we convicts, who tortured our guardian with our malicious machinations, our orneri-

[2] GOODNIGHT!, by *Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky)*. Trans. by *Richard Lourie*. Viking. $22.95.

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ness, our ingratitute. In his suffering eyes, we, we are the hangmen; his conscience clean, and certain of his own kindness, he takes offense and bewails the injustice done him. . . ."

The second chapter takes us into the Gulag, the "zone," where Sinyavsky finds an odd if sardonic contentment, even going so far as to admit that he is happy to be in a camp. Drawing an implicit parallel to the wandering structure of his own novel, he describes the advantages of imprisonment—"the slow, shuffling pace from one wall to another, which gradually affords us greater breadth of vision, the serenity and spiritual balance that permit clearer reflection. . . . [The] apparently pointless amblings from one end of the room to the other assume the task of extracting and elucidating meaning, or, to be more precise, this action coincides with the growth of meaning." Like Tim O'Brien's Vietnam vet repeatedly circling the lake, the pacing prisoner in *Goodnight!* becomes a vivid emblem of the author's narrative strategies.

The next two sections concern the two dominant figures in Sinyavsky's life. Chapter 3, probably the most conventional and straightforward of the five, is an affectionate portrait of the author's father, who was arrested in the twenties for being an American spy (actually he was distributing gifts to schools for an American famine-relief society). Providing a potent foil to this figure is Joseph Stalin, the subject of Chapter 4. Sinyavsky's treatment of the man he calls "The Mustache" is typically complex. The near-mythical figure appears to have been as important to Sinyavsky's development as was his father, and is depicted as an object of fear, awe, disgust, anger, and—bizarre as it may seem—even sympathy: "What a burden it must be to turn into your own portrait while you're still alive and have to do everything your worshippers demand of their god."

That extraordinary spirit of sympathy suffuses the entire book, and nowhere is it more in evidence than in the last chapter, in which Sinyavsky addresses the man who exposed him to the authorities. Seryozha, a friend from childhood, is by all reports a despicable figure—insecure, socially inept, resentful—so that Sinyavsky's attempts to defend him seem almost superhumanly generous. He claims that Seryozha, though brilliant, is a kind of moral cipher, an empty shell with the shape of a human being. One cannot hate such a creature, since it can only act according to its nature. Seryozha, the victimizer, is thus transformed into a victim of sorts in Sinyavsky's always paradoxical vision.

Characteristically, the narrative of this difficult book ends thirteen years earlier than it began. But this is not mere playfulness; rather, it's what Sinyavsky regards to the end as simple artistic integrity: "The past cannot be grasped in sequence. It slips through our fingers the minute we begin building monuments to it. In our desire to tell our story in chronological order, year by year, day by day, to speak of everything that befell us in our life, we unintentionally distort the

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greater truth, which under the circumstances, is best adhered to." While Sinyavsky may occasionally exasperate us readers in his attempts to capture that greater truth, *Goodnight!* is never less than rewarding.

Some remarkably similar observations about the fluidity of time turn up in a remarkably different book—*Sexing the Cherry*,[3] by the young British writer Jeanette Winterson:

> Thinking about time is to acknowledge two contradictory certainties: that our outward lives are governed by the seasons and the clock; that our inward lives are governed by something much less regular—an imaginative impulse cutting through the dictates of daily time, and leaving us free to ignore the boundaries of here and now and pass like lightning along the coil of pure time. . . .

The speaker here is Jordan, an idealistic naturalist/explorer who is one of two alternating narrators in the book. Jordan lives in seventeenth-century London—or that, at least, is his home base. But Jordan frequently sails off to distant times and places in search of many things, among them exotic botanicals, a new, more enlightened strain of romantic heroism, and a perhaps-imaginary dancer named Fortunata, whom he once met at a dinner party in a house without floors (the tables and chairs were all suspended by ropes from the ceiling). The book's second voice is that of the Dog Woman, a coarse but unfailingly good-natured giantess who found Jordan as a baby on the banks of the Thames. A staunch royalist, she has an unsettling habit of using her prodigious strength to murder Puritans, hypocrites, and others whom she regards as the King's opponents. Where Jordan's voice tends toward a dreamy didacticism, the Dog Woman's is earthy, natural, and utterly charming. The two of them make a provocative pair of narrators.

Sexing the Cherry—as should be clear to you by now—is not the quiet, well-observed novel of sensibility that American publishers seem to regard as the sole stock in trade of contemporary British women. Its spirit traces back more directly to Rabelais than to Jane Austen. Daring in both form and content, the book moves about on several levels of reality and time (even dipping into a 1990s realism toward the end). Even more unusual, however, it actually has an agenda to advance—something quite rare these days. Winterson possesses a good deal of O'Brien's fearlessness in speaking directly to her concerns. The result is a book that can be read—on one level, at least—as a polemic against narrowness, inflexibility, pedestrianism. As Jordan observes early on: "Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle." *Sexing the*

[3] SEXING THE CHERRY, by *Jeanette Winterson*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $19.95.

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Cherry is a celebration of those other journeys. Like the pineapples and bananas that challenge the Londoners' notions of what a fruit should be, the book explores the alternatives that exist between the rigid borders of the accepted.

The book does have some flaws, though I feel reluctant to mention them, given how much I admire this novel. While Winterson's command over two very different voices is strong for most of the book, I felt that toward the end the voices began losing their distinctness. I've tried to convince myself that this was intentional—that Winterson was trying to embrace some kind of fusion between the spirits of Jordan and Dog Woman—but I think I might be trying to make a virtue of infelicity. And am I unjustified in complaining that the book is a little unfair to men? With a few exceptions, the males in the book are depicted as cruel, hypocritical, and/or insensitive, as little more than obstacles in the way of the self-realization of women (one of the longer sections, in fact, relates how each of twelve dancing princesses did away with their typically unsympathetic husbands). While this is probably no more than we men deserve, I do think Winterson might have extended her ample imaginative sympathies to embrace the possibility that maleness is not automatically a character flaw. But here again, daring, originality, and innovation make up for a lot. Like the cherry tree in Winterson's title, her book is a graft of unlike things that combine to form "a third kind, without seed or parent." Anyone at all interested in unconventional fiction should—I'm tempted to write "must"—read this novel.

We find more metaphors for imagination in Steven Millhauser's recent collection *The Barnum Museum*,[4] but while Jeanette Winterson's imaginative flights tend to be sea voyages, Millhauser's are long wanderings through dark, convoluted passageways filled with objects. In what becomes a narrative tic in this thematically narrow book, numerous characters make such journeys, passing from room to room, deeper into an insular world where the laws of realism start to wobble at the edges. The differences in metaphors chosen by the two writers—the sea voyage versus the trip into the labyrinth—reveal much about the different worlds they create in their fictions. For Winterson, imagination is a breaking of bonds, so the world of *Sexing the Cherry* is correspondingly free, full of possibility and fresh air. Imagination for Millhauser, on the other hand, is an obsessive, even unhealthy, generation of arcane image and reality; *The Barnum Museum* is, as a result, claustrophobic, inwardly directed, feverish. What life there is in the book is the life of insects rather than the life of birds.

The title story, for instance, is an extended description of a museum—the exhibits within it, the effect of its presence on the local

[4] THE BARNUM MUSEUM, by *Steven Millhauser*. Poseidon Press. $18.95.

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population, the dynamics of a visit. It is a museum of illusion (The Chamber of False Things, with its cinema snow, joke-shop ink spills, and waxen museum guards), of music-hall coarseness (the fun-house air ducts that lift the ladies' skirts), and of erotic wonder (The Hall of Mermaids). The museum resembles many of the book's other buildings in that it is a seemingly endless warren of rooms and corridors; no one knows exactly how large the place is, where (or even whether) the rooms stop. There even is a resident group of museum eremites, a small and rigorously disciplined sect who permanently wander the museum's byways, believing that life outside its walls is a delusion.

"The Barnum Museum" has much in common with the other stories in this collection, and in itself epitomizes the book's substantial strengths as well as its substantial weaknesses. It is, for one thing, fastidiously written, and its sensibility of gothic surrealism has an offbeat appeal. Few if any other writers are creating stories like these: In "The Sepia Postcard" a young man wanders the rooms of a bizarre gift shop until he finds an antique photograph that, echoing Dorian Gray's portrait, begins to change to reflect his own tainted inner state. "Alice, Falling" fills in the details of the heroine's endless freefall down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland.* A sinister magician in "Eisenheim the Illusionist" becomes so adept at erasing the line between reality and illusion that he eventually becomes an illusion himself. And in perhaps the best story, "The Invention of Robert Herendeen," a young man with a fecund but blocked imagination decides to create a woman in his head, limb by limb, hair by hair. Steven Millhauser is clearly a very cunning writer, and his stories are always intelligent, clever, finely crafted, and linguistically rich.

They are also, however, curiously inert. While one or two stories in this vein, read in isolation, can be rewarding, an entire collection of them ultimately becomes maddening. An astonishing amount of the prose in these 237 pages consists of long, elaborate catalogues of precisely described objects. And there are no people in these stories, at least no real people. There are Alice figures, and Mesmer figures, and Sinbad figures—all fictional constructs rather than human beings. Even the less derivative characters fail to breathe; they are sometimes complex, but never truly alive, and since they rarely interact with anything except objects and architecture (usually created by their own esoteric minds), there is a limit to the command they hold over this reader's interest. Millhauser shares Vladimir Nabokov's fascination with the exquisite game of fiction, recognizing that it is an artificial medium whose rules we all play along with willingly. But where Nabokov's game is chess—dynamic, dramatic, human—Millhauser's, in this book, is something more along the lines of logic puzzles. Our minds alone are engaged here; our interest is purely academic. Somehow, I feel that even games must have higher stakes than this.

Finally, the extreme self-consciousness evident in all of these books

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reaches a new high in *The Knight Has Died*,[5] a novel by the Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom. We are told on page 1 by the narrator (who is not Cees Nooteboom) that the novel we are reading is not actually his own; he is finishing the novel of another writer, Andre Steenkamp, who died before finishing his novel about a writer who dies before finishing a novel that is later finished by another writer. All of this would be confusing enough, but since our narrator has very little respect for Steenkamp's novel, which he regards as an exercise in self-mythologizing, we have several levels of irony as well as narration to deal with in the book.

The outline of the story, thank goodness, is quite simple, so we are at least spared any heavy ambiguity in terms of story. Andre Steenkamp has traveled to a small Spanish island in the Mediterranean, ostensibly to finish his novel, but more accurately to participate in the creation of his own romantic legend—to perish nobly, or at least artistically, in a land far from Holland. To this end, he falls in with the island's expatriate community of decadent artists and writers (no slouches themselves when it comes to self-consciousness), and proceeds to turn them into the saints, the disciples, the fellow knights required for his myth. He even finds a lady love—a fellow Hollander with whom he conducts a short-lived (and highly distasteful) romance. But his efforts are for naught. For all of Andre's constant posing, his continuous processing of experience into art (bogus art, to hear our narrator tell it), he cannot overcome his increasing fear and paralysis. He is ill, it seems; he feels that his life is emptying out somehow, that he is losing his own reality. He is dying, of course, and on several different levels—physical, metaphorical, emotional. And in the end, when the narrator is called on to complete this novel by writing Steenkamp's death, he cannot do it. He cannot give Steenkamp the dramatic, meaningful end he desired. "It is not finished, he is not dead. He still roams around in his papers, a blind man unable to see himself. He still does not know himself and refuses to be killed, refuses to be sent to the land of heroes. . . . I have failed."

Of course, I realize that the above synopsis must sound hopelessly befuddling, and reading Nooteboom's novel is admittedly not an easy undertaking. I suspect that some of the extra levels of distance the author places between himself and his subject may be an easy way of avoiding commitment to any point of view whatever. And I'm not convinced that Nooteboom is in full control of his narrative; he may have indulged himself a little too much in intellectual gamesplaying for his own good. But even if the experiment has failed here (and I suspect it has), it is another interesting and extravagant failure. Excess, after all, is the price we must sometimes pay for innovation. And as Jeanette Winterson's irrepressible Dog Woman would say: "For myself, I would rather live with sins of excess than sins of denial."

[5] THE KNIGHT HAS DIED, by *Cees Nooteboom*. Trans. by *Adrienne Dixon*. Louisiana State University Press. $14.95.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

MONROE K. SPEARS has just completed the manuscript for a new collection of essays, to be entitled *Between Two Worlds*. . . . The paperback edition of LAURENCE LIEBERMAN's most recent book of poems, *The Creole Mephistopheles*, has just been published by Collier Books. . . . "A Scattering of Ashes" will appear in CARL DJERASSI's autobiography, *The Pill, Pgymy Chimps, and Degas's Horse*, forthcoming from Macmillan. . . . C. S. GISCOMBE* teaches creative writing and African-American literature at Illinois State University in Bloomington. He is the author of two books of poems, *Postcards* and *At Large*. . . . Aralia Press has published a limited edition of DAVID MASON's* narrative poem "Blackened Peaches." . . . ROBERT OLEN BUTLER* is the author of six novels, the most recent of which is *The Deuce* (Simon & Schuster). Simon & Schuster is also bringing out a collection of his short stories that includes "Mr. Green." . . . Jamaican poet LORNA GOODISON's* most recent books are *Heartease*, a collection of poems published by New Beacon in London, and *Baby Mother and the King of Swords*, short stories published by Longman. Her forthcoming book of poems is entitled *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses*. . . . LYNN EMANUEL* is an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Her poem in this issue will be included in her new collection *The Death of the Author*. . . . TOM WAYMAN's most recent book of poems is *In a Small House on the Outskirts of Heaven* (Harbour Publishing, Madeira, B.C.). . . . JOHN LOUGHERY teaches English at the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School in New York City. He is currently at work on a biography of the art critic and detective novelist Willard Huntington Wright (S. S. Van Dine).

BERT CARDULLO has been appointed Assistant Professor of Theatre and Drama at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is the editor of the recently published *The Film Criticism of Vernon Young* (University Press of America). . . . HAROLD FROMM's *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value* will be published by the University of Georgia Press in 1991. He is currently at work on a book about the mythmaking tendencies of contemporary, ecologically-oriented "nature-writing." . . . CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK teaches English at Williams College. A collection of her essays, *Rejoicing to Concur with the Common Reader*, is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press. . . . FELIX STEFANILE* is Professor Emeritus of English at Purdue University. . . . DEAN FLOWER is currently director of the Film Studies Program at Smith College; also, he notes "still safely lodged in the English Department teaching alliteration, irony, undergraduates, zeugma." . . . GARY KRIST, author of *The Garden State* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), is at work on a novel.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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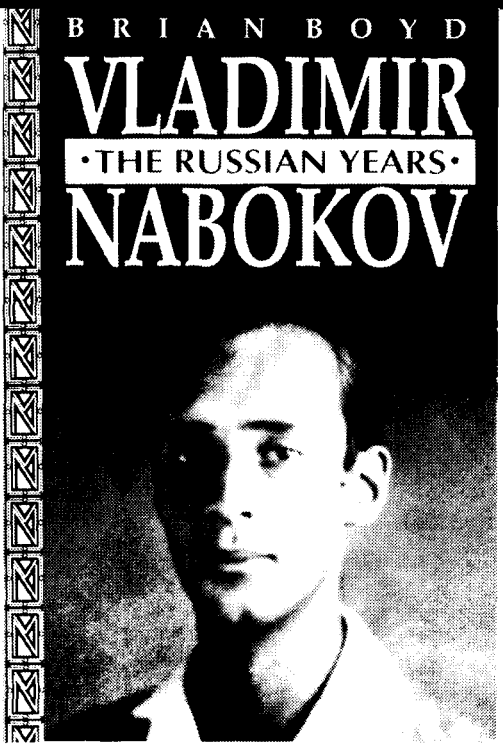

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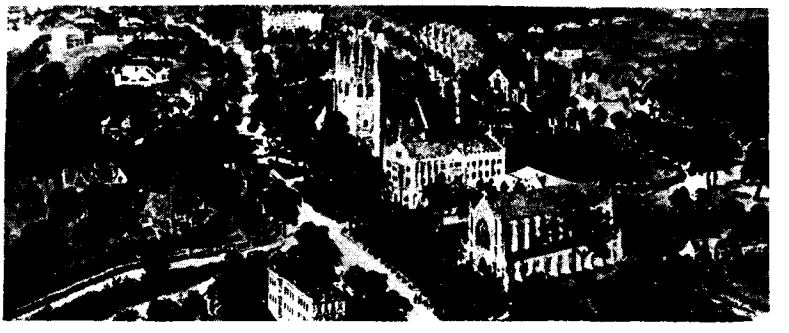

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IN THIS ISSUE:

The curse of much travel writing is of course that the traveler puts too rosy a face on the whole business. Just as, before we left, everyone had assured us that we would have a *wonderful* time—whether or not they'd had any experience on Amtrak—so in writing about a trip one may feel compelled to be upbeat about everything. I've been known to have downbeat moments, and M. noted a couple of points during the trip when I became what she called the Gloomy Traveler, radiating mistrust, disapproval, and general ill-humor.

—William H. Pritchard, "All Aboard Amtrak," p. 538.

Pound and Eliot were right in their comments made when the early enthusiasm for free verse was at its height: the point is not whether verse is formal or free, but whether or not it is good. The balance or tension between the two—form and freedom—is individual for each poet, and finding the right kind is a fundamental part of achieving one's own voice and style. Doctrinaire prescriptions are irrelevant or harmful.

—Monroe K. Spears,
"The Poetics of the New Formalism," p. 549.

I was heading, most immediately, for North Bay. My father, when he was growing up in Birmingham, had a cousin pen pal there up until World War II and so I wanted to *see* the very far-off place that the family had extended to when my grandfather's brother had gone from the family home in Buff Bay, Jamaica, B.W.I. to North Bay and lived there, God knows why, while my grandfather had landed in Birmingham, USA and schemed without success to get himself out to the West Coast. The family at Neueport Services then was like mine: people of color from near the equator here among the great outcroppings of rock, mosses, ripple-less still lakes choked with lily pads, coniferous trees looming through the pale, pale mist, all the *northern* things, all their "subtle demands."

—C. S. Giscombe, "Ontario Towns," p. 582.

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